

COMMON SENSE COMMENTARY SERIES

THE PEACE OF GOD FROM THE GOD OF PEACE

● PHILIPPI

● GALATIA

● COLOSSAE

● EPHESUS

Optimistic, conversational,
thought-provoking commentary
on Paul's letter to the
Philippians

C CLIFTON JONES

C Clifton Jones

The Peace of God from the God of Peace

An optimistic, conversational,
thought-provoking commentary on
Paul's letter to the Philippians

First Edition (2.0)

C Clifton Jones

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Preface

An imperfect commentary

This commentary leaves a lot to be desired. Of this, I am painfully aware. But at the same time, I hope it will encourage some people, especially those under the spiritual bondage of laws, rules, regulations, and control, which are widespread today.

I've spent the last fifty years carefully reading many systematic theologies, commentaries, and well-written books. So, I am very aware of how far I have fallen short of the high bar that's been set before me. My approach in this commentary differs from most of those I've read, admired, and benefited from over the years. My only complaint about most good commentaries is that they are difficult to get through. So, I've tried to write something anyone can read and relate to.

A conversational commentary

I've attempted to make this commentary conversational. That is, I want readers to feel they are having a *conversation* about the subject at hand. For me, this means saying things using common, informal language – even using folksy and slang terms at times – just as most people do when talking with their friends. This makes my commentary a bit wordy, but my goal is for the reader to relax, enjoy the ride, and settle in for a journey through one of Paul's letters which he writes so passionately.

However, I've also tried to include some background information and explain words used in the original language – Greek. But this is a *comment-ary*, so I have commented as I felt it might be helpful and appropriate. It is left to the reader to investigate things more carefully if so desired.

A thought-provoking commentary

I have also tried to be thought-provoking. This is more of my goal than having readers automatically accept what I write. I always encourage people to take Paul's advice and "Examine everything carefully." You are always better off doing that than blindly trusting anyone. Always take everything you hear and read directly to God for his take on what is true. Your ability to do this (as granted to everyone by God) is greater than most teachers and writers want you to believe. God will never fail you. Trust him.

A verse-by-verse commentary

At best, I am a rank amateur when it comes to the Greek language. I took my first year of Greek from Darell Bock at Dallas Theological Seminary in 1982. I also completed a video course by Bill Mounce (as a refresher) about 30 years later. Then, as an attempt to get my second year of Greek under my belt, I worked through Daniel Wallace's excellent and thorough book, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. So, I depend on those who have dedicated their life to being experts in this ancient language, and so I learn from them.

However, I do know Greek well enough to understand what they are saying when they weigh in on the New Testament writings. Translation and interpretation of any language is both an art and a science. One big thing I learned from Wallace is that all translators interpret, to some degree, when they translate.

From Mounce, I learned that “common sense is your best friend” when translating any text.

So, though I depend on those who know Greek better than I do, I still check and double-check them against each other, use common sense, and do not just assume any translation is perfect. The Old Testament book of Proverbs says there is “safety in a multitude of counselors,” which certainly applies here.

Some translations are very literal renderings of the original New Testament text in an attempt to be as accurate as possible. Others are very loose and flexible, desiring to express the original author’s intent in English. There are disadvantages to each method, and there is no perfect way to translate anything from one language to another. So, I try to combine all these principles into the text I use in my commentaries. I want it both readable and accurate, and sometimes these two goals are at odds with each other. The translation I use is a combination of many. However, I am convinced that if readers use common sense, read with the full context in mind, and seek God for understanding, pretty much any popular translation will be sufficient.

In my commentaries, every time a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, I use a different font so it will stand out. The font I use is a *handwriting font that looks like this*. When you see this, a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, followed by the comments of this commentary.

An optimistic commentary

Finally, and perhaps this is the most important feature of my commentary, I try to present God, life, and eternity in the most optimistic perspective possible. I do this simply because this is how Paul and all the other New Testament writers present God. This is not to say there is never anything harsh or severe spoken about God. There is! But as Paul once wrote, “Behold the goodness and severity of God.” He presents a balance of how to

view God. Essentially, he is saying that God is *severe in his goodness* but also *good in his severity*. And this is the key. Despite any severity that he allows and brings, the goodness of God always represents who God is and how he operates. He always acts in goodness and wants the very best for all humanity that he so loves and created in his own image!

Introduction

This is Paul's letter to the Philippians. I'm sure I say something like this about all of Paul's letters, but this is a really special book. Actually, they all are. However, each one is special in a different way. It's like going to Baskin Robbins and seeing all the different flavors. There is such a variety to choose from. Every letter of Paul addresses a different group of people and a special set of situations and problems.

There's some repetition, but mostly Paul writes with great diversity. For example, Galatians focuses on one main theme ... never go back under the Law! It's an important, foundational book. Then Ephesians is kind of lofty and has a great variety of subjects. It's more practical and uplifting. Paul starts it by telling his readers about all their spiritual blessings in Christ.

In this letter, Philippians, Paul brings more of a *heartfelt* presentation. Unlike some of his other letters, Paul brings very little correction or discipline. This group of believers seems to really have their act together in attitude and action, as we shall soon see. Philippians is also loaded with *memorable passages*, the kind people tend to memorize and dwell on. I'll be pointing these out along the way. Here are the ten memorable passages we will encounter in this letter:

“God, who began a good work in you, will continue his work until it is finally finished.” (1:6)

“For me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better.” (1:21)

“Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. Have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.” (2:4-5)

“Everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” (3:8)

“Forgetting the past, I look forward to what lies ahead and press on to reach the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.” (3:13-14)

“Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say rejoice!” (4:4)

“Don’t worry about anything, pray about everything, thank God for all he has done, and you will experience the *Peace of God*.” (4:6-7)

“Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise, and the *God of peace* will be with you.” (4:8-9)

The title of this commentary, *The Peace of God from the God of Peace*, was taken from these last two passages. This letter is all good, uplifting, and practical stuff! When I encounter someone going through trouble or trying to get to know God better, I often give them Philippians to read. It’s not difficult, and Paul’s ideas are easy to understand.

1. God Always at Work

(Philippians 1:1-6)

Belonging to Christ (1:1)

This letter is from Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus. Sometimes, Paul writes letters from just himself, and sometimes, he writes them *with* someone else – like Timothy. His letters to the Galatians and the Ephesians were both written by Paul alone. However, his letter to the Colossians and this letter were both written by Paul *and* Timothy. Timothy was a younger man and almost like a son to Paul. Paul was the older, experienced mentor; Timothy was the younger, up-and-coming disciple. Paul mentions him frequently in many of his thirteen letters.

He identifies himself and Timothy as “slaves of Christ.” He’s used this analogy in other letters, but he doesn’t mean it in a bad way. In his letter to the Galatians, he talks about them being slaves to the law, only to find freedom in Christ. However, when we’re connected to Christ by faith, it is (in Paul’s mind) a good kind of slavery. We are totally committed to him where we are, ultimately safe and secure from all harm. It is there, and there alone, that we find freedom from laws, rules, regulations, and requirements in our spiritual lives that well-intentioned people so often try to place on us. And why do they do this? Simply because it was done to them, and they routinely pass it on ... and we tend to let them.

But Paul always wants people to be totally free and truly free in their spiritual lives. His goal in his letter to the Galatians was to never go back under the law, not any law by God or men, because there is no need to do so. We are now free in Christ because of God's unconditional love, as demonstrated by Jesus. It's all an act of God's amazing grace (unmerited favor) poured out on us every day. So, in real spiritual freedom, we are protected. In that sense, we are *slaves* to Christ, but in a very good way. It's the kind of slavery we choose, and we would never want to be any other kind of slave because here alone, we find true freedom. It is a paradox, for sure!

I am writing to people in Philippi who belonged to Christ Jesus, including the elders and deacons. Hey, it's really nice of Paul to include the leaders. Perhaps he thought, "Hey, I'll even let the leaders read this letter." This shows you where Paul's emphasis was. It's on the people, and it *includes* the leaders. Notice that Paul did not say, "I'm writing to the leaders of the church, and that also includes those who attend." Please know that any good leader will always say, "Look, folks, I'm a servant. I'm here to serve the people. In fact, I am one of these people. I'm just one man (or woman) among the congregation and here to serve. I'm here to lead by serving, by seeing what the needs are, and by trying to solve, together, our common problems for the good of everyone and for the glory of God. Tell me what you need and what you think we need to do. I can't please everybody, but I will try to serve the whole group, and I'm here to do just that. It's not about what *I want* but about what *we need*. It's never a matter of, 'Okay, I'm in charge, and everybody shut up and do what I say.'"

To better explain this, I've often used the analogy of going on a trip where a leader is driving the car, and he (or she) has several options. They can look at the passengers and say, "Buckle up, shut up, sit there and be quiet, and I'll let you know when we arrive." Now that's one kind of leadership that happens in various

forms in homes, businesses, and churches today. But there is a better kind of leadership, one where the leader sees him (or her) self as a servant. They are there to serve but from a position of leading. This kind of leader looks at the passengers and says, “Hey, we’re going to take this trip together, and I’m going to drive. I’ll be working the gas, the clutch, the brakes, and the steering wheel. I will do my best to get everyone there safely, but where would you like to go? How would you like to get there? Do you want to take the scenic route? Do you want to stop for dinner later? Are you in a hurry? Should I safely pass the other cars, or should I just stay in the right lane? Yes, I am the one driving, but I want to accommodate all of you. So, I’m here to serve you as your driver.” You can always tell a good leader because they don’t try to get their way. The best leaders I know work hard to consider the best interests of all those they lead – and, therefore, who they *serve*. But, of course, they get lobbied, and people come up and say, “At the church that I used to go to, here is what we did ...” Sometimes people have good ideas to consider, but sometimes it’s all about them and a good leader just kindly says, “Well, this is not your old church. This is your new church. And so, we want your input, but let’s work together to do the best we can before God.” So good leaders are servants, and Paul includes them (Elders and Deacons) when he writes to the people in Philippi.

Paul closes his short introduction this way, *May God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.* May God do it? Is this what Paul is hoping for? I don’t think he’s saying, “You know, maybe grace and peace will happen, and maybe it won’t. I’m just hoping for it.” Instead, I think he’s saying, “My desire, my hope, my preference is that the grace of God, which he brings in the form of peace, will be experienced in all of your lives.” God always brings grace and peace, but will we receive it? Later, near the end of this letter, Paul will reveal what

we must do, on our end, to receive peace from God, who is the one who gives us peace. Based on that passage, this commentary is titled *The Peace of God from the God of Peace*. As we shall see when we get there, Paul is doing a little play on words to express this important experience that we can have.

When I think, I pray (1:3)

Paul now launches into the meat of his letter like this, *Every time I think of you, I thank God for all of you. Whenever I pray, I make requests to God on your behalf, and I do this with great joy.* Oh, that's interesting. Whenever he even *thinks* about them, he prays and thanks God for them. Prayer doesn't have to be something you do every morning. You don't even have to close your eyes, fold your hands, or kneel. But you can if you want to if it helps you pray. You can also get your Bible out and have a special prayer time. Nothing is wrong with that, but none of those things are required. Prayer is much simpler than that. I believe God prefers honesty over formality. Just talk to him anywhere, anytime, for any reason! You can drive down the road in your car and think about someone. That's a prayer! How can it not be? God is not really into rituals – we are! (See my commentary on Galatians, *Never Going Back!* for Paul's take on this.) God puts up with rituals and formalities but really desires a closer relationship with us.

And so, when Paul thinks of these Philippians, he prays and thanks God for them. And he does so with great joy. This is how it should be, not a burden. When I was young, I had a bunch of index cards, and I would write what I wanted to pray about on each card. I went through them during my designated daily prayer time. Nothing wrong with doing this. It must have been the organized engineer in me. But it became burdensome. I was determined to pray for everybody, every day, passionately.

However, I think I was making it too hard, way too mechanized, and too much of a duty. And, of course, it didn't last. Perhaps you've heard about people trying to pray every day for 30 or 60 minutes or even longer. A few people can pray formally in almost all their waking hours. They're known as *prayer warriors*, and the Monks of the Middle Ages did the same thing. So, it can be done. But it is never *required* by God (unless he requires it for some particular individual, and they know it's what God wants for them.) I don't know how they do it, and I don't know how sincere they are. I'm assuming it's sincere. Not for me to judge. But most people cannot do this, and it's ok that they can't. God just wants an honest, genuine relationship with us where we just talk to him, maybe all the time in every situation in life!

Paul makes requests for them with joy. It's not a burdensome duty for him and shouldn't be for us. Quit making prayer so hard. Just talk to God anywhere, anytime, about anything. Make requests for yourself and others. He's always listening. Let it be an enjoyable thing. It's a good thing when we pray for others. It gets it settled and off our minds. Yet, somehow, prayer is always a mysterious thing. I'm not sure I want God to take my requests too seriously. Perhaps I don't know what I'm talking about, and he should just do what he knows to be best. So, I always append my prayers like Jesus did, "Hey God, your will be done! Here's my idea. I'm getting this off my chest. I want to talk to you and here's what I think. But the bottom line is ... don't listen to me! Do what you know is always the very best thing to do." And I think God does. But He lets us pray and commune with him, tag along, and participate in His actions. He never says, "Well, that's not a very good idea, but I'll do it anyway since you asked." So, I don't fully understand how prayer works, and I think it's more about communing with God and talking with him. It's not like a *genie in a bottle*, or a *magic wand*, or a way to get what we want. It's mostly just communicating with God, developing an intimate relationship, fellowshiping with him, and then accepting

whatever he decides. Paul will deal more with prayer at the end of this letter.

An example of prayer

When we pray in his name, our hearts are right, we're thinking straight, and we're close to God; we'll instinctively pray the right things. For sure, many prayers are going up to God, like, "Heal my wife (or husband or child)," or "Get me that job." Maybe even a few prayers like, "I really want to marry that person; please make them love me." Remember the Garth Brooks song, *Thank God for Unanswered Prayer*? In the song, he goes to the County Fair with his wife and kids and sees a girl he once wanted to marry, then looks at his wife and kids and says, "Thank God for unanswered prayer!" This is because he realized that it was a blessing when God did not answer his prayer. What he wanted in the past so badly would not have been the best thing for him – but he couldn't know it back then. We are wise to keep in mind when we don't get what we want in life, and God seems not to answer our prayers; he might just be saving us from harm and keeping us out of trouble. Or he may want us to learn something, painful as it might be, that will end up making us a better person, which is always God's goal.

Sometimes we pray hard for a job and never get it. At the time, it seemed so right to us and seemed like the perfect job. But we don't really know. It might be a terrible experience or something that takes us in a less-than-best direction in our lives. Then again, God can answer our prayer even though he knows what trouble it will bring. He may be saying, "You really want to learn that way? Okay, I'll grant your request," knowing that, eventually, good will come of it. It could be God will answer *yes*, and you will encounter the boss of your nightmares. But, as a result, you may someday be a good boss or forever appreciate all the good bosses you have. There is no limit to the unexpected

things we might learn. The point is that we can't lose when we trust God, no matter his answer.

So now I pray like this, "God, here's what I'm thinking. This job seems right to me, and I really want it. But please step in and say *no* if this is not best for me." The last job I got before I retired was to become a technical writer (after a long career as a Software/Hardware Engineer.) I was slowing down in life, and it seemed like a better fit in my closing years of work. I remember praying, "Your will be done." I told God that I really wanted the job, plus I had a good friend who worked there who *went to bat* for me. But I also remember thinking and praying, "You know what, God, if I'm not supposed to have this job, then I'm asking you to step in and stop this from happening. It might not be the best job for me. It might not be best for my wife and my future. And if you say *no*, I will rest in your decision. I'd like this job; it looks like a good fit, but don't listen to me. My wisdom is really limited." It turned out that I got the job despite being up against some very steep competition. I remember feeling like I had approached it the right way in prayer and was ready, regardless of what happened. At the time, I had no idea that I would become a writer in my retirement, but I'm sure that God's *yes* to me, in this case, was his way of preparing me for better things in my future.

God at work in us (1:5)

You've all been my partners in spreading the Good News about Jesus from the very first time you heard it to this very day. Though our relationship with God is very personal and is the most important relationship in life, our faith is also a *group effort* and a *team sport*. We really can't live in isolation, and there is nothing better in life than doing things together with other people. This is true inside and outside of any church setting.

Activities with other people and families are what we all live for, at school, outdoor sports, community projects, vacations, and even at work, where we spend most of our time. Life, and therefore true Christianity, is about people. Some in history have spent their whole lives in isolation and contemplation. And perhaps this was what they were called to do. But most people are social animals – it's how we're made. For Paul, one of the great joys in life was partnering with other people to get the Good News out for everyone to hear and benefit from.

This is best done in the routine of daily living, as we interact with people in our natural settings. It's not about going to some building one day a week and doing things there. It may include this, but life is much more than that. Many do not attend church and live fulfilled, successful, and joyous lives. Way too many church-going people believe everyone should be attending some church somewhere or they are living outside the will of God. What a shallow and self-centered view of life. Many of those who think like this are slaves to religion and strive to pull others in where “misery loves company.” But many people can enjoy church services as an important part of their lives without it dominating or owning them. Church and religion *can* be a trap for some people, but it does not have to be.

Verse 6 is the first of many *memorable* passages that Paul presents in this letter. *I am certain that God, who started a good work in you, will continue it until he is finally finished when Christ Jesus returns.* He's keying off the fact that they're all partners, together, with God and that he had been involved with them from day one. Paul is certain – no question whatsoever – that God not only *started* working in their lives but will continue to do so until he gets the job done. And this is true of all of us, every human being. How could God ever settle for anything less? When Jesus died on the cross, he said, “It is finished!” Everything that needed to be done to save all humanity – every human being

— was done there. The sins of the world were “taken away,” according to John in his gospel account. He wrote, “Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” Where were they taken from? Us! All of us. And where were they taken to? He took them on himself. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, “He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf so that we can become as perfect as God.” It is a finished work for us to which we can add nothing. All we can do is thank God for his love, for such amazing grace, and then engage with God personally. But when we do this, we earn nothing with God because we can't. Salvation is something God does *for* us because he loves us; it's an act completely done by grace (unmerited favor).

Our minds and hearts need to change, not God's. He's already good with us. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul also wrote, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.” Think about that. If God reconciled (made things right) to the world to himself, then we are all good with him. There is no problem in God's mind except for us to turn to him, come home, and live our lives in him. Right after Paul wrote this, he added, “And so, be reconciled to God.” We need to change our minds toward God, not change God's mind toward us by doing something to appease him! He won't get mad and send people to hell forever as pure retaliation, totally void of any corrective purpose. His goal and only purpose for us is to be saved, restored, reconciled, redeemed, corrected, and rescued. Nothing else.

Also, God is eternally patient, never desiring to destroy anyone. This is why he will never give up on anyone. Never! He can't because love can't forsake or abandon. God never reaches the point where he says, “Ya know, I used to want everyone to be saved, but I'm tired of waiting, so I'll just give up on saving people.” He will never do this because his love will not allow him to. Instead, he says, “Okay, I can wait. It's not a problem. If you

need more time to learn, then that's what we'll do till the job is done." That's what a real savior does. Nothing less.

This is why Paul is so certain that God not only *started* working in them but will never quit until he *finishes* his work in their lives. He will keep on working until Christ returns and makes everything right. This is what the word "justice" means in Greek – "to make things right." God brings *ultimate* justice; therefore, he must, eventually, make everything right, or he's not God!

Now, it's true that some people will check out of this world while still out of fellowship with God – not really knowing him personally. But still, God will never give up on them or forsake them. He loves all humanity equally because his love is infinite and unconditional. I don't know exactly how he will work all this out in eternity, but He will. He must. He's a savior, and saviors save! They don't give up. It is possible that the moment people die, they become a new creation, and all that *old sinful self* is gone, and they realize it. And they will (as Paul wrote elsewhere) fall on their knees and say, "Oh, Jesus is indeed Lord, and he's my savior. Thank you, thank you, thank you!" It won't be God with his foot on their neck, forcing them to bow down. He won't need to or want to. He will just say, "Welcome home!" The most greatly forgiven sinners will be fighting their way to the front of the crowd, wanting to praise God for the salvation they got by grace, which they didn't earn.

And so, I believe everyone, no matter how sinful, wounded, broken, and damaged they might be, will someday be safe in the presence of their Creator to live with him forever. I don't know exactly when or how, but I agree with Paul that God not only begins to do good work in all of us, but he continues it until it's finished on the day when Christ returns.

2. Love that Overflows (Philippians 1:7-10)

A special place in my heart (1:7a)

It is right that I feel the way I do about all of you because you hold a special place in my heart. As I stated previously, Philippians is a very *heartfelt* book. This kind of care and compassion came from Paul, a tough-as-nails guy who dragged Christians out of their homes and killed them. He thought he was doing God's work, and God let him do it for quite some time, allowing him to believe he was doing the right thing. I think God let him do this so that when Paul finally came around, he would never forget what he did. It's not so much that God wanted him to feel guilty for the rest of his life but to realize the essence of God's grace through the stark contrast of his experiences before and after knowing Jesus. Paul was a changed man, a very changed man. Sometimes, it takes extreme measures to bring about extreme changes in us for the betterment of everyone! This lesson in Paul's life took him fourteen years to sort out. It seems to be what drove him to accomplish everything he did in life. He saw himself as the *chief of sinners*, saved by grace, which motivated him to get out there and tell everyone about the Good News embodied in Jesus. And man, oh man, the guy was a one-man army! He evangelized the whole, civilized Western World of that day – that huge region surrounding the Mediterranean Sea that was conquered by Alexander the Great and became the mighty

Roman Empire. He started many churches, like this one in Philippi, where he viewed them as “partners in spreading the Good News,” which gave them a *special place* in his heart.

Special favor of God (1:7b)

You share with me the special favor of God in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. He's saying they are, together, heirs of God's special favor, which is what grace is (unmerited favor from God). When God acts in grace, there is no merit on our part. He just favors us because he loves us. He doesn't wait for us to get our act together and respond correctly. It's good when we do, but he doesn't wait for us before he works in our lives, loves us, sends Jesus to die on the cross for us, or anything else. He's a gracious God who comes and does what needs to be done for us, completely and finally. He effectively says, “Let's get things worked out in your life.” We earn nothing by believing, working, keeping the law, or anything else. So, God will never say, “Okay, finally, you've come around. Now I'm going to start doing something in your life.” No way! We all share in the special favor of God (his grace).

This Philippians letter is another one he wrote while in prison (along with his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians). He claimed God's special favor (grace) even in prison. Prisons in Paul's day were tough places to be. At the end of his life, because he was a Roman citizen, he earned some kind of *house arrest* in Rome for two years while awaiting his trial before Caesar. But when writing to the Philippians, he was in prison, in chains, and he had plenty of time to think and write. Perhaps Timothy visited him, and they talked about his various letters. As we saw in his letter to the Galatians, he had trouble with his eyes. He may have had someone like Timothy write his letters, and then he would

sign his name at the end with large letters. Even in a disgusting prison, Paul shared with his readers the favor of God (grace) that he experienced. This is because God's grace is present no matter where we are in life or what we are doing!

God knows how much I love you with the tender passion of Christ and how I long to be with you. It always surprises me how this vicious persecutor became a big lovable pussycat. Yet, he's still tenacious as heck. He's still that driven Apostle who can speak up when needed, as he did in his letter to the Galatians, and wrote, "Who has bewitched you? Why are you going back under the slavery of The Law when, in reality, you've been set free in the Spirit?" Sometimes, he laid it thick on them. But even when he did, he was tender-hearted and loving, saying, "Hey folks, I just want the best for you, and so does God! He knows how much I love you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus." So, this is a very heartfelt letter.

Not only did God start good work in these Philippians, but Paul is confident that God will continue doing this work in them. I'm sure Paul was realistic about this. He knew some would fall away like the Galatians did, but he had more confidence in this group of people. However, Paul's confidence is ultimately in God even as he lingers in prison. He also knows that the flaws in his readers do not limit God. Sometimes God limits what he does, but always for some better, grand purpose. If we choose not to respond to God, he seems to say, "Okay, I won't force you. But I'm gonna win in the end because I'll just work harder in your life and find new ways to get involved, open your eyes, and bring essential lessons." So, God will continue that good work he started in them, even in those who are marginally engaged with God, and he will do this until the day Christ returns. So, Paul tells them, "It is right that I should feel as I do about you. You have a special place in my heart." This is so far from Paul (when he was called Saul), who used to drag Christians out of their homes and

kill them. Now, they have a special place in his heart! Paul is a man who went through a great transformation. It took a long time, about fourteen years.

It takes time for us to change, too. Sometimes, we experience quick spurts of spiritual growth, and we think, “Boy, I’m really on board with God now.” You may have a new and better job, you’ve fallen in love again, or you’ve gotten quite good at some skill or sport, and you are thanking God for his goodness. But be careful, the honeymoon in all these good things in life is temporary. It’s not that they are no longer good; it’s just that the new wears off everything, and we start asking, “Now what?” and “So what?” It takes time to develop a meaningful relationship with people and with God. Many people who come to Christ or get religious are zealous and get involved, but they can be like a bull in a china shop because they’re full of zeal with limited wisdom. Have you ever been there or seen this in others? We, and they, usually do not realize it.

So, it takes time to learn, grow, and develop. It took Paul a long time, too, but I am always amazed that God is never in a hurry to do anything. Think of all the people over that fourteen-year period when Paul was in training with God, who could have been hearing about the Good News and benefiting from it. But they didn’t, because Paul wasn’t ready yet. However, God wasn’t at any disadvantage. He didn’t say, “Oh no, all these people need to know about Jesus, they’re going to hell, and I can’t stop it!” Not a chance. He’s much more successful than that. God is never in a hurry to do things *right*; eventually, everything gets done correctly.

So, Paul told them, “You share with me the special favor of God in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. God knows how much I love you with the tender compassion of Christ and long to be with you.” For a guy who used to kill Christians, Paul became a very selfless, compassionate, caring person. It makes me think of Charles

Colson. He once bragged that he would walk over his grandmother to get Richard Nixon re-elected. He was known as the *hatchet man* of the White House. But when he came to Christ, his life totally changed, much like Paul's. When God gets ahold of someone who responds to his love, God's love will eventually win. Sometimes it happens fast, and sometimes it takes a lifetime. God works on his timetable, which is partly the timetable that he lets us set, knowing there are things we'll learn along the way. But, again, God's not in a hurry to do things right; eventually, he will make everything right!

Overflowing love (1:9)

I pray that your love will overflow more and more. We can't love enough if it's true love. True love always acts in the best interest of others. That's what love does. Love isn't just hugging and kissing, though that might be how we express it. That is more of a romantic love. That kind of love is easy, but it is important. Real love is acting in the best interest of others even when they don't deserve it. That kind of love is easy to understand but hard to do! Some people are easy to love, and others are hard. But we can love people we don't like, and sometimes we need to.

Paul adds this to his wanting their love to overflow, *So that you'll keep growing in knowledge and understanding.* There's a lot to know and a lot to understand in life. We're all going through a learning curve. When I encounter someone who does not seem to know or understand very much (in spiritual or secular things), I remind myself that I was once there! It helps me to be patient with them, just as others have been with me. In some ways, the Good News message about Jesus is very simple. According to Paul, it boils down to, "Christ and him crucified." In other words, *who* Jesus was and *what* he did. He was the Son of

God, Messiah (the special one who was promised to come), and Savior of the World who came to demonstrate self-sacrificing love, dying on the cross and taking away the sins of the world. As a result, we're all going to live with God forever. This was his plan from eternity past. But then there's daily living, and that's where we need more knowledge and understanding because life is complicated. The more we trust God and just live in the *realistic* realm (not an idealistic one), let ourselves slip in and out of doing our best (because none of us can do this all the time), the more God takes care of the rest! Things will go as well as possible. God knows our limitations and weaknesses, and he's okay with them. We need only to do our best and trust him. Is there anyone, other than perhaps Jesus, who has been able to do more or reach perfection? Live with who you are, with all your imperfections, and know that God loves you and will never forsake you. He has a wonderful future in store for all of us – nothing less!

Knowledge and understanding are what we need to have, and they come over time through experience. God doesn't just take everybody out of life the moment they turn to him. He leaves us here so we can learn and help other people. Both learning and helping are two of the greatest joys in life. Those who are distracted by chasing the next thrill in life are on an endless and never-satisfying chase. Some of them figure it out, and some never do, missing out on experiencing the best things in life that are usually free and simple.

What really matters (1:10)

Paul continues. I want you to understand what really matters and live pure and blameless lives until Jesus Christ returns. Now, that's interesting. He wants them to know what *really matters*. He wants them to live a pure and blameless life. To the degree that we can live it, that is a life of relaxed peace and

low stress. We all want that. But this is easier to imagine than achieve. Life is full of hard to avoid turmoil and trouble. Most aches and pains are unavoidable. But emotional, mental, psychological, and spiritual struggles can sometimes be avoided or minimized. One way we can get there is by understanding what *really matters*. And what matters most is not always *big* things; it's often just the *basic* things. This is what Paul wants for them so they can live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. In Paul's letters, he always saw "the day of Christ's return" as the big, future, grand, and final event. That's the big goal. That's what's going to happen. And I guess it's still coming ... unless, in some way, Christ came spiritually in the past or does so every day for someone he takes home with him. It's kind of mysterious.

There are different views of the future, but according to Paul and most of the New Testament writers, someday, this earth and life as we know it will be gone, and we will live on a new, re-created earth. Everybody guesses when this will happen and how it will work. Many get very dogmatic about it even though it is all still in the future. But everyone has the right to speculate and guess beyond what is written. The church has a long history of speculation that is all over the map in variation. Today, each group that has inherited one of these schools of thought is indoctrinated into believing they are right and everyone else is wrong. Sometimes it is humorous to observe (in history and today). But it is also very sad that so many people give into this and pretty much destroy the unity we could all have by sticking with the facts and things that are clear rather than fighting over things that are never fully explained. We are wise to leave some things unexplained and let them be the mysteries they are. But humans tend to want everything neatly packaged with no uncertainty, even if the certainty they have is unverifiable.

Some will even go so far as to say, "If you don't agree with us, you can't come to church – or you can come, but you cannot freely and respectfully express what you believe." Many years ago,

I spent a year looking into all the differing views of the future. I first learned that very good people (true believers in Jesus) were on all sides of this issue. The second thing I learned was that there was a very wide variety of views based on the same reading of the New Testament. This told me that it probably was unclear, and different groups resorted to speculation, becoming very dogmatic because none had any real proof. People tend to do this when their beliefs lack real evidence. But I do not blame them for doing so, nor do I judge them. We all have insecurities and doubts we must deal with.

As a result of all this, I became kind of an “All-millennialist” (a play on words derived from “Amillennialism,” one of about three different positions held today). My view, All-millennialism, claims, “It’s *all* going to work out in the end!” God is in control of the future, and he won’t take a vote to find out which view is most popular. He will do what is best for this world that he so loves, just as he always has. Who knows, maybe the correct view of the future is something no one has ever imagined. Or, maybe, it is some combination of the three views (Amillennial, Premillennial, and Postmillennial) that prevail today! Does it really matter as long as God knows what he is doing and will succeed at saving the world in his time and his way?

I’ve looked at all the different views, and I learned that people really like to speculate, get dogmatic about it, make a creed or doctrinal statement, and then impose it on everyone else as if they have a monopoly on the truth. I’ve learned to take future things with great caution and focus on things that have *already* happened and are part of the historical record that can never change. This, to me, is what really matters, and it seemed that way to Paul, too, when he talked about “the simplicity of the Good News” and when he focused on “Christ and him crucified” (*who* Jesus was and *what* he did).

Paul just wants them to understand what *really matters* so that they can live pure and blameless lives. That’s so good. It’s such a

good way to live – pure and blameless, to the degree that we can. It makes for a clear conscience and calm, low-stress living. When living pure and blameless, we're not going around causing a lot of trouble. When we are young, we experience a lot of passions and are confronted with many interesting choices that are kind of “edgy.” It is easy to go *off the rails* a little bit because it's exciting, but there's something to be said for purity, dull as it may seem. But even purity can be taken too far, but it's into a realm where it's no longer true purity. It becomes legalism and places people back under some law, trying to live a perfect life in their own effort to impress God somehow and earn favor with him. The Puritans and Victorians are examples of this, and there are groups today who traffic in the same kind of unrealistic practices that enslave people and keep them from experiencing the freedom found only in God's grace.

There's something to be said for just resting in God and not chasing all those things that appeal to us and invigorate us. I'm not talking about the abundance of good things God has graciously given us. Most of life is about this – good things that are vast in scope and variety. God wants us to enjoy the life he has given us as a gift. God never wants to keep us from any good thing, only from things that will destroy us and kill our joy in life. This is what sin is all about; It is those things and areas of life that do us harm and harm to those around us. God is in no way a killjoy. He's one who brings joy and wants this for everyone. But he often allows us to sin and hurt ourselves (and those around us), knowing he will bring good from it that will last forever.

3. The Fruit of Salvation

(Philippians 1:11)

Christ is returning soon?

The writers of the New Testament were always looking forward to the day when Christ would return, and it appears they expected it could happen at any time. In fact, some of them predicted it would be soon, in their own lifetime. Jesus himself (according to Matthew) once told a crowd of followers that some standing there would not die before he would come in glory with all his angels! That is very specific and allows very little *wiggle room* for interpretation. He also said that “this generation” (people living at that time) would not pass away until all the predictions he had just given them would take place. But that didn’t happen in any kind of spectacular literal sense in which Jesus seemed to be framing it. Was he uttering a false prophecy? Was he mistaken? Elsewhere, he was reported to have admitted that he did not even know the day or hour when he would return! Maybe he meant his predictions as spiritual realities to be experienced differently by each believer.

Paul, in his letters, writes that he is expecting the second coming of Jesus to be soon. However, no matter the truth, Paul expresses a tender compassion for these Philippians; he prays that their love will overflow more and more and that they’ll keep growing in knowledge and understanding. He wrote, “I want you to understand what matters so that you may live pure and

blameless lives until the day of Christ's return." Now, that might sound a little boring. "Oh yeah, the old morality thing," you may be thinking. "And don't ever have any fun." But when we live a "pure and blameless life," we reduce the stress in our lives.

I have a counseling friend who must deal with people who have not lived anything close to a pure and blameless life. In fact, many of them do the opposite, and it creates chaos in their life – not that any of us are *truly* pure and blameless. No one reaches perfection in this life. But the more we are on the *pure and blameless* side of the equation, where our lives are pretty darn reasonable and decent, the more we don't go around causing trouble for ourselves and others. We're not seeking all that kind of junk in our lives, and we can live pretty much a calm, enjoyable, and peaceful life. My friend has observed that some people seem unable to avoid drama. Some people get so into chaos that they don't even know what peace is. They get so used to the drama that if you took it away for a day, they would miss it and feel like something's wrong. She also says, "If people get used to sin and living in it, arguing, fighting and striving, they don't even see it as sin; it just normal life for them. But once they get their mind right, all that chaotic living disappears." She admits that her job can be extremely frustrating but also extremely rewarding. That's the nature of the kind of work she does. But her goal is the same as Paul's – that people will understand what *really matters* so that they may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return.

The result of salvation (1:11a)

Paul goes on to write, *May you always experience the result of your salvation*. He doesn't just hope for them to be saved from their sin, but that the result (the outcome) of that salvation by God will always continue and be experienced. Remember, the word *salvation* means *to deliver*. You can literally plug in the word *deliverance* when you see the word *salvation*. But

always ask, “Saved from what?” The word itself doesn't mean “delivering people from going to hell forever.” This word *could* be used in this way, and some people hold this interpretation. However, it is never used this way in the New Testament. In any of his letters, Paul certainly never warns about people going to hell for their sins or unbelief. It seems like if he ever wanted to warn his readers, he would do so in his longer and most thorough letter to the Romans. But he didn't. Why not? Because he didn't believe it and knew that God was “in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (as he wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians).

Paul believed they were saved (delivered) from something. If not saved from going to hell forever, then what? We are all saved (delivered) from the *penalty* of sin itself (not from some penalty imposed by God). Sin is our enemy, not God. He loves his world and “sent his son to save it, not condemn it.” (John 3:17, which no one ever quotes, or displays on signs at football games). Sin literally kills us, and God saves us from that penalty of sin by someday raising everyone from the dead at the end of time. Jesus said there would come a day when *all* who are in the graves will be raised from the dead. So, God saves (delivers) the world that he so loves (John 3:16) from sin and the penalty of death that comes with it. He does not save people from himself, nor from some kind of angry retaliation to someday be carried out by him, totally void of any correcting, redeeming, or restoring purpose. Big difference!

We are saved (delivered) from the *entanglement* of sin in this life when we believe and enter into a loving relationship with God. This is why believing is so important. How else could we ever know God and benefit from knowing him unless we believe? We can't! However, keep in mind that when we believe, we earn nothing with God. He doesn't say, “Okay, you have finally believed. Now I won't have to send you to hell forever.” This horrible view of God became popular in the fifth century after Augustine promoted it, and the Roman Catholic church adopted

it to frighten, control, and dominate ignorant people during the Middle Ages.

Our salvation is our deliverance from entanglement with sin in this life. God has already secured all humanity for all eternity in Jesus through what he did, “taking away the sin of the world” and acting as “Savior of the World” (according to John). All the sins we commit – past, present, and future – are all taken care of by God. This is why salvation is said to be *by grace* everywhere in the New Testament. God is such a wonderful, loving Creator. Do not miss out on experiencing this fully and never let anyone place you back under any kind of laws, rules, regulations, fear, guilt, or anything else in your spiritual life. You are free from all of that! (See my commentary on Paul’s letter to the Galatians titled, “Never Going Back!” for more detail from Paul on how this kind of freedom works).

But make no mistake; though God has eternally saved everyone from sin and death, we can still become *entangled* in sin in this life. This decision is largely our choice, and God allows it because he knows that only a heart that chooses to return his love will experience *real* love. When we return God’s love, he is always there to help us live in (and with) him, always helping us to get back up when we fall. We can never lose when trusting God.

After Paul wrote, “May you always experience the result of your salvation,” he added, *which is the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ*. This is the ultimate result of our salvation – the righteous character produced by God’s presence in our lives, through Jesus. We are saved (delivered) from the foolishness and craziness of this life so that we can have *righteous character*. That is, having character within us that is *right* in every way. We act right; we treat people right; we live wisely; we take care of ourselves and those we love even when it’s hard to do. We have a new awareness and mindset; We want to do what’s right.

However, we don't always do this perfectly. No one does, and no one can. But that's okay. God does not require perfection. Instead, he has made us perfect in the *new person* we are in Christ. God has made us this way, spiritually, even though our flesh (physical, material being) is far from perfect. We all experience this. But those who know God and walk with him experience perfection as a *new person* in Christ despite their failure, weakness, and struggle in the flesh.

No condemnation in Christ

Paul put it this way in his letter to the Romans (in chapter seven), "I find that I do wrong things that I don't want to do, and don't do good things that I do want to do." Then he lamented, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" He was experiencing all the temptations, failures, frailty, and flaws that everyone experiences. But then he answered his own question by writing, "Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ!" He knew who would deliver him from his "body of death" for all eternity and who would also (to the degree it can be attained) deliver him from the entanglement of sin in this life. God did it through this person, Jesus Christ, who came to save the world and not condemn it. Paul followed this up with his opening words in Romans Eight, "There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus our Lord." What Good News. No condemnation! There will never be any condemnation for anyone in eternity because God has taken care of our sin problem that would have otherwise resulted in eternal death. He accomplishes this by someday raising everyone from the dead. Everyone, all humanity, was placed in Christ at the time of the cross. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Romans (in the second half of chapter five), "Just as in Adam all humanity was plunged into ruin and condemnation by sin, so also all humanity was made righteous by Jesus." Jesus became the *Second Adam* (the final one), who became

the new head of the human race and saved it from all that the *First Adam* had ruined.

By believing in what Jesus accomplished, people realize their high position in Christ, something he did for everyone. Others who don't believe are just as safe *in Christ* but don't fully experience it. They can't because they don't believe and do not engage personally with God. But God's saving grace through Jesus has already redeemed them from sin and death, and they will experience the resurrection along with everyone else, even though they do not realize it now, in this life. But they will someday, when it happens, on that great day when Jesus returns to raise up everyone from the dead and usher them into the presence of God as newly created beings, becoming everything they were ever meant to be by God who created them and so loves them.

Righteous character sounds so religious, but it just means "being a person who does what is right." We can all appreciate this and realize the difference when it is not present in our lives. We have *character* when we live the way God designed us to live, and we are not so foolish. We all have a *slight* bent toward foolishness, and some people are *strongly* bent toward it. But God loves us all the same – with maximum, unconditional love – and it's only a matter of God going after all those "wandering sheep" out there who struggle more with temptation and give into foolishness more easily. This can be any of us during different seasons of our lives. And when it's not us, we can only thank God for working in our lives and helping us escape. But eventually, he will correct and restore everyone. No one will be left behind, despite the popular, money-making series of books and movies that bear that title, designed to scare people into following some set of religious beliefs. It is much like the tactics used in the Middle Ages – something much of the modern-day church inherited from Roman Catholicism. Don't forget that almost all churches today came out of Catholicism. Though there was a reformation, it did

not reform the church past the Fourth Century and the huge influence of Augustine. Many things in the church were much different before the 300s when Christianity became a religion!

When we seek God, understand the Good News about Jesus, and trust God through him, that's when this *righteous character* begins to be produced in us. This results in a more productive, interesting, and enjoyable life than we could ever experience by following our foolish passions and allowing them to prevail. It is easy to do, and people experience a lot of exciting stimulation, but it is never worth it in the long haul of life. One of my good friends, who foolishly followed this path, breaching his marriage of thirty years, told me, "The *collateral damage* that comes from this is not worth any temporary thrill we gain." Whether it's anger, lust for some person or object, or the power that comes with wanting to be in control, the cheap temporary thrill is not worth the cost of missing out on real peace, joy, and satisfaction in life. This only comes with *righteous character*, which can only come from God. But he wants everyone to have this; he never holds back on producing it in those who will simply trust him.

Many people get caught up in fighting each other and wanting to capture their *turf* at home, work, politics, or at church. I don't know how they go on living like that, except that the stimulus must be so strong that they can't seem to escape. Some of them get emotionally invested in a flurry of emails about some political leader. It owns many of them. Who would want to live like that if they only knew the peace and freedom of knowing God, knowing he has everything under control, and that they can rest in knowing him? There is no better life, and it allows our energy to be put into good and productive activities that truly satisfy – the way God wants it to be for us.

Bringing glory to God (1:11b)

This will glorify and praise God. This improved character that is produced in us by God does indeed glorify him. Why shouldn't it? He has accomplished a good and wonderful thing in us that demonstrates his love. But God's not up there saying, "Yeah, man. Bring it on. I'm saving all of you so that you'll glorify me and really think I'm great." Quite the opposite. God only wants the best for those he loves, which is everyone. The only thing he gets out of it is an unselfish experience of seeing us do better and enjoy the gift of life he has granted us. This is what love does. It's never about itself!

So, when we grow and become a better person with a better life and improved character, God is naturally glorified as a result. He says, "Hey, I'm pleased with you and all the good I have produced in you." God is not a big version of us. Instead, we are a small, limited version of him. He made us in his own image, very much like himself, with so many good qualities waiting to blossom in us and flourish. Somebody once said, "God created man in his own image ... but then man returned the favor." In other words, we instinctively want to create a God in our own image. People say, "Well, with all your positive views of God, you are making him into what you want him to be, like yourself." But I tell them, "No, it's just the opposite. If I made a god in my own image, he would be foolish, short-sighted, selfish, and vindictive. Instead, I let God be everything I am not, perfect in every way, loving without any conditions, and always working to restore, correct, redeem, and save those he loves!" If I turn God into somebody like me, he'd be selfish, wayward, foolish, and all the things I tend to be. But the God I know is very much *not* like me. He's much better. And so, when I follow Christ and become more righteous in character, I become more like him. Then I instinctively glorify him by saying, "Thank you, God, for all you do and for helping me be more like you ... more loving, more

kind, more caring, patient, and giving of myself. I still have a long way to go, but thanks for getting me started, and I look forward to where you will take me next.”

This is so wonderful. Our relationship with God is not getting down on our knees and fearing a vindictive God whose plan is to send us all to hell unless we do something (in action or attitude) to ward off his wrath. We need not live in fear and stress like Dorothy and her three friends standing before the Wizard of Oz, who made great noise, thrusting out fire. I’m sure you remember the scene with smoke going up into the air and the four of them all trembling. That’s not who God is at all. That’s the God created by man in *his* own image to scare and control people, exploiting their ignorance, insecurity, guilt, and fear. Thank God for Toto – Dorothy’s little dog that pulled the curtain back and revealed the guy standing behind it, pulling all the levers. And what did the Great Oz say when this happened? “Ignore that man over there behind the curtain. He’s nothing.” But the Great Oz was lying to them and asking them to dismiss logic and what they saw with their own eyes. There are some in religion today who are asking the same thing of people who they are supposed to be serving; they play on their fears and insecurities of others, tapping into a horrible view of God that they were taught all their lives.

I busted out of this kind of delusion, but it was not easy; it took a long time (till I was 60) and required a lot of “examining everything carefully,” as Paul exhorted his readers to do. This is the essence of religion – unlike the kind of religion that James wrote about in his letter. He identified “pure religion” as caring for those in need (like widows and orphans) and monitoring our own personal lives rather than that of others. That’s *pure* religion. The rest of religion is trying to control people and operate in the realm of fear, exploiting their sense of frustration, guilt, and insecurity. Unfortunately, this is usually done by well-intentioned but misguided people who are just passing on what was done to them in the name of God, salvation, love, judgment, and

punishment. When people are taught the same things over and over all their lives, and no other ideas are allowed to be considered, they cannot help but believe what they are told and hold it as absolute truth. This is *indoctrination* (not education), where a carefully constructed narrative about God, life, and eternity is exclusively and dogmatically presented. It is a very dangerous practice whether in a home, at work, in politics, or at church. The outcome of careful indoctrination is predictable. Paul's solution was simple and clear. He told his readers to "examine everything carefully" and then leave it in the hands of God (where it belongs) to reveal the truth to everyone who honestly seeks him.

4. In Chains for Jesus (Philippians 1:12-14)

As I have mentioned, this letter has many memorable verses, and Paul will present more of them. I'll point them out as they come up. The first one encountered was, "He who began a good work in you is going to continue it to the day of Christ's return." That's just one of many memorable verses that are good to get in your head. They will serve you well, over and over in your life.

Spreading the Good News (1:12)

Paul then brings a little change of pace in verse 12. *I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters...* He addresses his reader many times in this loving, personal manner. He does this a lot. Calling them "dear brothers and sisters" reflects a very kind-hearted, genuine disposition that sees others as equals, not *lording over* them with some kind of lofty and exclusive authority. The modern-day church employs plenty of titles, positions, and hierarchies that Paul and the other followers of Jesus never attached to themselves. At most, they were simply men among men, followers of Jesus, and desiring to love and help others to the glory of God. Paul often warns in his letters about those who want to control people rather than serve them. He would write things like, "I urge you by the mercies of God to make your life different and to turn to Christ." He never tells them, "You better do this because I say so as an apostle who is in authority over

you.” In one letter, he wrote, “As an Apostle, I could command you to do this, but I’m not going to. Instead, I urge you to take a different path and follow Christ.” He ultimately leaves spiritual decisions between God and people, where they belong for each person. It doesn’t mean he doesn’t say anything at all about wrongdoing. He exhorted people many times in his letters. But he didn’t, ultimately, try to step in and force things. Neither does God, except on rare occasions, because he knows it takes time. God allows a great deal of sin and injustice in the world (more than most people can tolerate) and keeps urging us to do what’s right, knowing he will make everything right and “reconcile everything to himself” in eternity. Paul does the same thing in his dealings with people. So should we!

After addressing them personally and passionately, Paul writes this, *Everything I’ve experienced here in prison has helped spread the Good News. Everyone here, even those guarding me, knows that I am in chains because of Christ.* Everybody in that prison knew Paul. No surprise. He had one of those bigger-than-life personalities. It’s what made him a high-ranking Pharisee, but also what made him a zealous and successful evangelist. Whether they believed Paul’s Good News message or not, they knew about it and understood why he was in prison. Preaching “Christ and him crucified,” Paul traveled ten thousand miles all over the Roman Empire, starting churches. Rome didn’t like it. He was stirring up trouble. That’s what got him imprisoned. And, of course, the Jews were persecuting him and saying things about him that weren’t true. The second half of the book of Acts chronicles all of this in detail. He was brought before Festus, Agrippa, and other Roman authorities, to whom he always presented the Good News about Jesus. Festus accused Paul of being insane, but nothing ever seemed to deter Paul from his mission.

So, everybody knew that Paul was in chains because of his belief in Jesus and his relentless preaching about him. It wasn't because he was a crook, a thief, or a murderer like those around him. He was a murderer of Christians before his conversion, but he was not in prison for that. He was there because he was committed to getting out the Good News message about Jesus. But in those days, calling anyone other than Caesar "Lord" was equivalent to treason. They knew he was there for his religious convictions, and they might have thought, "Yeah, you deserve it. You're a troublemaker." But also, they couldn't help but observe him and how he behaved. They must have realized that Paul was a good man and that he'd been chained up for his beliefs.

The outcome of imprisonment (1:14)

Paul goes on to describe the effect of his imprisonment. *Because of my imprisonment, most believers have gained new confidence and boldly share God's message without fear.* And this happens sometimes. Real leaders in war need not bark out commands. Maybe just, "Let's go!" Instead, they're the first ones charging up the hill, getting shot at and knocked over, inspiring others to continue fighting. And Paul was plowing the way for others, even though he was sitting in a prison, chained to a wall. Perhaps his fellow believers were saying, "If Paul can go to jail, still preach about Jesus, and maintain his faith, then I sure can. I'm emboldened to go share the same Good News message!"

Paul's background as a Pharisee, as one who killed Christians, followed by fourteen years of thinking about it and claiming he received revelation from Jesus himself, prepared him to carry out his mission and never quit. It was far from an easy life. There were no material benefits. Paul had been whipped, stoned, left for dead, shipwrecked, and chased down like a dog by the Jewish leaders who hated him for turning against them. He'd been through it all, yet nothing ever stopped this guy. He just kept

going. People saw this and could not help but be encouraged by it. They gained confidence and began to speak boldly of God's message without fear – well, maybe not *as much* fear as before. It would only be human to be a little fearful and apprehensive, but never enough to stop Paul or his fellow believers that he inspired.

I was once labeled a heretic and a false teacher by my church leaders and long-time friends! It was no fun, but I kind of got used to it. I learned to take on the humble attitude of Christ (which Paul will speak of in Philippians Two) as best I could and love them anyway. The true gospel of God's saving grace, which removes all boasting on our part and leaves us simply giving *thanks* to God, is something very hard for many people to accept. I've often thought that if I lived in the Middle Ages, I'd be out in the public square with my head and hands in shackles (along with many others). I often wonder if I would be as bold as these Philippians were if I didn't live in a country that protects my liberty and affords me freedom of belief and speech!

We have so much freedom. We have it so good, here and now. There's indeed a persecution against Christianity to some degree. But frankly, Christians often ask for it by their dogma and intolerance of almost everyone else. As a group of people, modern-day Christians can sometimes be very annoying and not nearly as loving as Jesus (and his followers) encouraged us to be. Instead of being a "fragrant aroma of Christ unto God" (as Paul called it in his second letter to the Corinthians), we often bring the "stench of proof texts," with *chapter and verse* references to use against people to make our point. It seems very hard for many people to just love others unconditionally, as God loves us. Some people make being a "Christian" way too hard. They sometimes tell people that they need to go to church, not sin as much, and believe more, or God will do something horrible to them (in this life or the one to come) as pure retaliation with no corrective purpose whatsoever. They are often told that they are going to hell because that's what they deserve. It's really a form of bigotry,

and it's all part of the intolerance many religious people are taught all their lives. They're taught a carefully crafted view of God, life, and eternity over and over. They are taught nothing else. When this happens, it becomes dogma in their minds, inherited from strong-willed church leaders. They take on this unkind mindset rather than one of encouragement as Paul had.

I'm not saying every church is like this, nor are all leaders selfish and mean-spirited. There are some really good churches out there and some really good leaders who are loving, helpful, and nurturing servants. If you observe carefully and get past the appearances, you can tell the difference. But the tendency of humans is to be *religious* and try to force things on others through indoctrination, peer pressure, and fear. This can happen at home, work, politics, and church. It takes courage to love and not fall into this kind of behavior and attitude. But because of Paul's imprisonment and how he dealt with it in a humble and wise manner, these Philippians gained a new level of confidence and were now able to speak boldly about God's message of love for all humanity through Jesus and the cross.

Encouragement

Encouragement is one of the best things in life that you can do for other people. If you have someone who encourages you, or if you are somebody for your kids, spouse, or friends, they can't help but see you enduring, and it need not be in jail like Paul. It can be enduring cancer treatments or a difficult relationship. It might be enduring a hard job where you're treated unfairly. But when they see you going through difficult things and you're trusting God, no matter what's going on in your situation, they will be encouraged. So, when you are enduring difficult times, keep in mind that loved ones and friends can't help but notice, will gain from your endurance, and that in God's way of doing things it is never a complete waste of time.

If Paul had been just an evangelist, traveling around, living a pretty good ministry life, stopping overnight here and there, preaching and receiving a love offering from his audience, he'd probably get a lot of praises like, "Hey, Paul, you're a really good teacher. We're inspired!" That might encourage them to some degree, but there's something about watching someone trust God as they go through difficulty that gives people boldness and encouragement. There is no better or more effective way. Paul probably had a more profound influence on these Philippian believers by writing to them from prison than he would have if he were free and getting around to more churches.

It's interesting how God works, how he is many steps ahead of us, and what he allows to come into our lives. I'm sure there was a time when Paul thought, "Why am I in prison? I can't do as much from prison!" And, perhaps, God was saying to him, "Oh, but Paul, you're getting more done from prison than you know. You're helping more people in a more effective way than if you'd been out there free as a bird, going around wherever you want and living a pretty good life as a traveling minister." It's intriguing to think through Paul's dilemma, realizing that he knows it's because of his imprisonment that "most of the believers have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear."

I've had things in my life, like a prolonged illness of one member of our family, and people would come up to me and say, "Man, I'm really encouraged by the fact that you keep trusting God through this long, difficult chronic illness thing that doesn't seem to ever go away!" But I thought, "Well, I'd rather trade places with you and let you be the one who's encouraging people by experiencing a difficult life." But that's not the way it works in God's economy. I look back now and realize that I had to play the role of *encourager*, and it gave me character. It also turned me into one! Ha! But now, I often ponder everything I've been through and what it all means. Is this true of you? I don't know

what you've been through, but I know you've been through *some* kind of difficulties (maybe even serious ones) unless you've been hiding in your house in total isolation all your life which would have a set of difficulties all its own! But whatever you've been through, God uses it – make no mistake. It might not be the way you wanted it, but it was the right way at the right time, even if you didn't understand why. Your friends, loved ones, and your kids are watching. Your spouse is watching. Everyone you know is watching. They're not necessarily aware that they are watching, but they can't help but notice what you're going through and ponder what it all means – sometimes in their own lives. They process all they see in life, as we all do, and you may influence people more than you ever imagined.

God can use your life in ways you don't even know about, and you may never fully understand until eternity. Just keep this in mind when you encounter various trials in life. James went so far (in his letter) to say, “Consider it all joy when you go through various difficulties because when your faith is tested, it results in a greater ability to persevere.” I remember, as a young 23-year-old, when I was first looking into Christianity and hearing this verse, it made no sense. But it intrigued me, and I wanted to know why someone would write such a thing. It took me about thirty years and a lot of trials (including a long family member's illness) to teach me what this really meant. It changed my life.

We don't have to be famous; we don't have to be a preacher; we can just live our lives quietly and consistently. I've often thought, “The last great lesson I'm going to teach my kids will be how to trust God when I'm dying and show them (more importantly) how faithful God is to me.” This was the last great lesson my dad taught me! It is all about how to move into that realm where you're slowing down, you're fading fast, and just trusting God to the end because you know he is faithful and worthy of your trust. At 96, my dad just kind of faded into eternity. We will do that someday, and your kids, friends, and

loved ones will watch. It's not that you'll be the greatest shining example above everybody else. But you will be one of many who demonstrate how you handle life and death. Somebody once said, "Give a witness for Christ, and when necessary, use some words!" Many times, it's how we live, not what we say, that has the most significant impact on people. As someone else once said, words are cheap, but actions are priceless.

A Poem

A good friend once told me that Philippians is one of his favorite books, but it always left him with many questions about what Paul went through and why. He concluded that we see such things as bad things, but Paul did not seem to see them that way – not even being in prison! He viewed them as another opportunity and a new way to present Jesus and his message to others. He wrote a poem about it and sent it to me:

*No dungeons deep nor prison bars
Can separate us from the joy that's ours
When sickness, trials, and calamity fall
When fears and doubts suddenly call
When circumstances we can't control
Flood our lives and pressure our souls
Then we're driven to that special place
It's in God's mercy, his love and his grace*

*A refuge found at the Cross of Christ,
Where peace reigns supreme, and all is made right
Then we hear from the throne above
Go into the world and walk in love
Love and laughter come from a heart
That is filled in full, not just in part
With God's love for all mankind*

To share his love, we must share his mind

*For love and laughter can only be
When in Christ our Lord, we've been set free
And free indeed is what he said
As his Father raised him from the dead
In Christ, we too, were raised
Alive in him to God's praise*

*So, with the cross in mind, we face tomorrow
Filled with love and hope, in the midst of sorrow
With the cross in mind, we face the hereafter
With our hearts filled with love and laughter*

He recently retired and is now working part-time at a funeral home. He likes to joke about the fact that it's really good work because nobody talks back to him; he can say whatever he wants. But he also has to pray every night that somebody will die so he can still have a job. Ha! I told him not to worry; he would always have job security.

5. Living vs. Dying **(Philippians 1:15-24)**

We're about halfway through the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians but let me go back and overlap slightly. He started out by saying, "Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make a request for all of you joyfully." Paul is a passionate and good-hearted guy. He's a totally different guy than the one that he used to be, dragging Christians out of their houses and killing them. But don't forget it took fourteen years for God to work everything through with him after he was converted. It took a long time for Paul to work all this stuff out and become the amazing person that he became, even though he saw himself as an imperfect "chief of sinners." Still, he became a very caring and loving kind of person.

"Whenever I pray, I make requests for all of you joyfully. For you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from when you first heard it until now." So, it seems they stayed with him in his mission to get the Good News message of God's grace out to the civilized world of his day. His mission field was the Eastern Mediterranean basin – Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and many other cities in that region that is known today as Türkiye. Paul ended up in Rome (the city to which he wrote his longest letter). He was eventually taken there, where he died. (See the second half of Acts for the whole story).

In one of his letters, Paul confessed that he did not consider himself an eloquent speaker. He was well-educated, but I don't

think he was a great orator. But he was a very smart guy, and he could talk with the best philosophers in his day, as he did on Mars Hill in Athens. But it was his message of the Good News that connected with people. It wasn't Paul's personality. I think God picked Paul, the worst anti-Christian out there and one of the top Pharisees, and converted him, making him the perfect example of how God can work to change people's lives. God picked the right guy to do the right job at the right time. Paul found that when he gave them the Good News about Jesus, they stuck with it and with him. Well, except for the Galatians, who were going back under the bondage of religion and Law after experiencing such wonderful freedom in the Holy Spirit. This is why he asked them, repeatedly, "Who's bewitched you? Why are you so quickly going back under the Law?" I'm sure all of them didn't, but enough of them did that it concerned Paul to devote a whole letter to this problem. (See my commentary on Galatians titled, "Never Going Back!") But these Philippians, in contrast, were apparently a pretty good group of folks.

Pure and impure motives (1:15)

Paul continues his letter in verse 15. *Some preach about Christ from jealousy and rivalry. Others preach with pure motives.* Oh, this gets interesting. This is one of the most amazing passages in the New Testament, and it shows where Paul's emphasis was. It wasn't about himself – and that's probably why it took God fourteen years to instill this in him. From the moment Paul got converted on the Damascus Road, he probably wanted to go out and tell everybody about Jesus. But God said, "Wait a minute, Paul. I've got a few things to work out in your life. I know you will instinctively take all that zeal you had when you were killing Christians and turn it into a motive to bring the Good News message to the world. But it could have come out

really distorted without me working in your life and tempering your zeal. So, I will take my time and get you *fully* prepared.”

There are all kinds of people out there preaching about Jesus. Some have very good motives, and some are selfish; this was true in Paul’s day, too. Interestingly, Paul was so focused on Jesus (who he was and what he did) that he did not care why people were preaching the Good News message about him. By the way, many views about Jesus emerged from the very beginning, all the way through the history of the church into the 4th century. They battled over it, and that battle still goes on today.

Paul further explains, *They preach because they love me, for they know I have been appointed to defend the Good News.* These are the ones who preach with good motives. They’re trying to support Paul, maybe saying, “We’re on board with you, Paul. Let’s go take this message of grace out for people to hear.” Paul then focuses on those with ill motives. *But others do not have pure motives as they preach about Christ.* What does he say next? He must conclude that they’re gonna go to hell forever. Right? Nope! Paul just goes on and writes, *They preach with selfish ambition.* He never uses the idea of hell as a weapon against even those who oppose him. He also never warns anyone about going to hell if they sin too much or fail to believe. Why not? It’s simply because he did not believe it. Most believers did not hold the idea of hell and damnation in the early church until Augustine made it popular at the end of the Fourth Century in his book, *City of God*.

This kind of preaching (with impure motives) can happen, even to good people. Some people are well-intentioned and do not realize how selfish they are in their ambition. It tends to blind them, and they fool themselves. Others are selfishly ambitious, and some of them know it. But they don’t care because it gets them what they want.

Some turn religion into drama and trauma, which can translate into becoming very powerful over easily swayed people. It is a vicious cycle for many of them. At some point in time, they realize, “Wow, everybody's listening to me. I'm the pastor of the church. I'm the only one, and I've got 300 (or more) people out there thinking I'm a great teacher.” Not everyone does this, but it's easy to become arrogant. Paul warned of this in his other letters by simply writing, “Knowledge puffs people up!” Any of us can get puffed up quickly and not even realize it.

After Paul said, “They preach with selfish ambition,” he further explained this by adding, ... *insincerely and making my imprisonment all the more painful*. Some people had something against Paul. There may have been a sense of competition going on in their minds. I don't think Paul was trying to compete with anyone, but just by being himself, being very popular, being accepted by many people, and doing a great job, they wanted to get in on it. This happens all the time in modern-day ministry. It shouldn't, but it does because it's all too human to fall into this selfish trap. But God always works through it.

What matters most (1:18)

Next, Paul tells his readers what is most important to him. *But that doesn't matter. Whether their motives are false or genuine, either way the message about Jesus is preached. So, I rejoice!* Remember, back in verse ten that Paul told them he wanted them to “understand what really matters?” What mattered to Paul was spreading the Good News message, and he proved it by living it. You'd think he'd say, “How dare they? I'm an apostle, and they're out there causing me trouble.” Instead, Paul concluded that the *message* was important, not the *motive*! Apparently, they had the right message but the wrong motive.

Some people today preach about Jesus and the way of salvation, but they are doing it to gain financially, be more popular, and be thought of more highly than someone else. They might compete with the church up the street with a bigger congregation. The wrong motives are endless. But for Paul, what mattered was that the Good News about Jesus was taught. He knew that the *message* about connecting with God spiritually helps people the most, not some *messenger* with wrong motives. Do you see how Paul didn't make it about himself? I think it took the whole fourteen years for God to get all that kind of selfishness out of him.

I will continue to rejoice because I know that it's your prayers and help from the spirit of Jesus that will deliver me. I don't think he necessarily said he would get out of jail. He might have thought, "Ya know, eventually God will give me freedom again, and I'll be able to travel around." However, the real deliverance he spoke of is more significant and deeply experienced than just physical deliverance from imprisonment.

This is, for sure, one of Paul's best letters. It's easy to read, passionate, practical, and encouraging. I know people who have memorized this whole letter. And perhaps you can see why; it has so much heartfelt stuff. It's one of the most encouraging books in the New Testament. It's short, to the point, and it's all positive.

About translations

Let me just say something about translations of the New Testament. There exists quite a range of them. Some are very literal and strict; they are almost word-for-word translations. But if a translation gets too literal, it loses some of the meaning intended by the writer. This is because the Greek language (the language used by the writers of the New Testament) isn't like English. How words are used in Greek depends on the culture in which they were written. The same exact words can have different

meanings in these two languages. Different thinking and different nuances exist in the words we use today in our modern-day English. So, if words are brought directly over from Greek into English (as some translators have tried to do), it can result in a mistranslation. A good translation is not always a literal transfer of words from one language to another. And so, sometimes, different English words must be used to represent the original author's meaning.

However, the disadvantage of allowing translators this flexibility is that they are humans with biases, and they can bring in their theology and opinions when they translate. Sometimes, this is intentional, but usually, it is not. All they can do is be as honest as possible. Still, they tend to choose English words that support their personal beliefs. Therefore, it's a good idea to read a number of translations, some that are strict and some that are more flexible. The Mirror Bible, The Message Bible, and others paraphrase the original text. These translators try to capture the original writer's intent by using many varied words. On the other hand, The New American Standard Bible and the famous King James Bible are stricter in their translation into English. So, it is good to look at different translations. Nothing wrong with that. Just keep in mind that God does not inspire translators!

The good and bad about shame

Paul then shares how painfully he is aware of his own limitations. *I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed.* Hey, don't we all? Years ago, I gave up, hoping I'd never again be ashamed of myself. Though it happens less and less in my life, I still mess up occasionally. For most of us, it is usually at home. This is because our closest relationships are where we struggle the most, despite how good they might be. My theory is that we can't help being ourselves, with all our mix of good and bad, and it's almost impossible to act (and react)

perfectly. It is easier to blame those closest to us because they are the most involved in our lives.

But this is where love and forgiveness need to come in. Realizing how much God loves and forgives us is probably the greatest tool for developing a good relationship with anyone, especially those closest to us. That's just life. It's part of being human. And once you get past all this selfish, petty nonsense, realize you are not perfect and never will be in this life, learn to laugh at yourself in a healthy way, and say to yourself, "Okay, I'll add that mistake to my list of things to watch out for," then you're free! Though aging has disadvantages, there is also a lot of freedom gained in getting older and putting life into a better perspective – especially our view of ourselves. And even when we do things that we are rightly ashamed of, we need not be overly ashamed, beating ourselves up and expecting from ourselves more than we can possibly live up to. This is why Jesus came – to tell us it's okay, that everything will end up right in eternity, and that this life is a learning and growing process that is ultimately for our best.

It's okay to be slightly ashamed occasionally, especially when we mess up and cause others grief. But some people live in shame. That's not healthy. Religion often takes advantage of this tendency in us – to feel shame way beyond what we need to. We experience guilt and shame for a reason. When rightly understood, it is a feedback indicator of how we are doing – a good thing when it is an accurate self-assessment – so we can make needed corrections and live a better and happier life. One of my friends, a family and marriage counselor, helps people deal with this all the time to get past guilt and shame successfully, not just ignoring it and saying, "I didn't do that. I almost never do anything wrong. It's always the other person." That's not the solution. But, on the other hand, sometimes our worst enemy is ourselves. Some people beat themselves up more than they do

anyone else. Not physically but emotionally, which can be just as bad or worse.

So, the two extremes need to be avoided, if possible. We can over-shame ourselves and others, especially children, causing a pulling away, sometimes resulting in self-destruction. On the other hand, if any person, especially a child, isn't disciplined in some way (hopefully in love), they can end up wild, out of control, a slave to their own emotions, and self-destruct in a very different way. I was fortunate, and I grew up with a typical mom-and-dad upbringing. My dad was pretty strict and didn't put up with any nonsense, while mom was always hugging me and saying, "Oh, poor, sweet baby." Ha! My dad would get kind of upset with it and say, "Quit babying him!" But somehow, it all balanced out. I have the nurturing that helps me today to be gentle and caring of others, and yet I have a realistic sense of when nonsense should end! It's always far from perfect for everyone; other people are raised differently. But I have learned that we all were assigned the parents we needed in order for God to work his perfect will in our lives. Sometimes it is later in life that people finally learn the lessons that began for them as a child.

Remember what Paul wrote in Philippians One? It is one of many memorable verses I will be pointing out along the way in this commentary. "I am certain that God, who began a good work in you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns." God does not just work in our lives (through parents and other means), but he will always finish what he starts, never failing to accomplish what he has set out to do in everyone's life. This is what it means for God to "so love his world" and to be "Savior of the World!"

Living or dying is good (1:20b)

After saying he hoped he would never be ashamed, Paul goes on and says, *I will continue to be bold for Christ, just as I have*

been in the past, and I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die. Paul has been bold in getting out his message of the Good News about Jesus. He wants to keep doing that, hoping he won't be ashamed by any misconduct. But then he continues and writes yet another memorable passage. *For me, living means living for Christ. And dying ... that is even better.* Now, a lot of people live the opposite way, where living is the best thing and dying is the worst thing. Others don't even want to live because it is really tough, yet at the same time, they're scared to death of dying. They're torn between two awful things. What a horrible way to live. Paul, too, was torn between two things, but it was between two good things!

He goes on to explain his dilemma further. *If I live, I can accomplish more by serving Christ. So, I really don't know which is better. I'm torn between two desires. I long to go be with Christ, which would be far better for me. Yet, for your sake, it is better that I continue to live.* I don't know about you, but as I get older, I kind of get tired of life. I've already done everything I want to do. But I'm also not in any hurry to check out of here because I still have things I want to do and experience. Sometimes I think, "Man, I'd like to go be with the Lord and just be done with all this nonsense." But then I think, "Wait a minute. Life can't be all about me getting what I want." I've got a wonderful wife of almost fifty years, two grown kids, and a beautiful granddaughter. They all still need me, and I need them. Life has an important purpose, being just what it is with all its good and bad. I can still help my family and my many friends, giving to them of myself the best I can, but with increasing limitations. There are many good things we all do, such as just enjoying life, traveling, hobbies, music, and a host of other things that are all a part of the gift of life God has granted each of us. I just bought two complicated, functioning, detailed wooden

systems that require assembly. In one of them, when completed, a ball goes up and down and around a complicated 3D maze. It looks like it will take me a month to put it together. But that's my kind of fun. My wife looks at it and says, "Having to deal with that thing would give me a headache!" But whatever it is you enjoy, go after it – big or small! Enjoy your God-given life.

So, Paul says, "I would gladly put all that aside and move on to bigger and better things in eternity, However, I'm willing to stay in order to love and be of help to others." Seems like a good and healthy attitude to have in life. But keep in mind that Paul probably did not have all the good things we are blessed with today that bring joy and satisfaction in life. He was pursued by the Jews who hated him and his Good News message that was such a threat to their religious domination of others. So, he was ready to get out of there, and yet he basically said, "I still have some work to do for the cause of Christ." Some people are going through horrible things in life; they just want to check out of here, and they commit suicide. That happens more often than most people realize. I've personally known about a half dozen cases in my lifetime. Sometimes people get old or really struggling with their health, and they're just begging, "God, please take me."

I remember my grandmother, who reached age 102 but was not in pain. However, her lament was, "God, why have you left me here so long? All my friends are gone, and I'm just *marking time* each day." Interestingly, she firmly believed she would live to see the Second Coming of Jesus. At that point, I started to think she was right. But, of course, it didn't happen. Maybe, in God's own way, he did a *second coming* just for her when he came to take her home at just the right time. If so, he does this for everyone!

6. Getting Out the Message (Philippians 1:25-27)

Remaining alive (1:25)

Based on everything Paul has just written about living and dying, he concludes with this, *Knowing this, I'm convinced that I will remain alive so I can continue to help all of you grow and experience the joy of your faith.* Now, I don't think Paul is saying that there's no way he could possibly die. He only knew that both possibilities (living or dying) had advantages. But it seems he suspected that he would live and accomplish more in life. For Paul, it was not about what he preferred (which was a hard choice for him) but what God would do to accomplish his will in Paul's life. I believe this is the situation for all of us. Regardless of what we may prefer – living or dying – God has many days for us to live but a single day for us to die. We can't make it come any sooner or later. I had a friend who once tried to commit suicide and knew how to do it. The attempt was made, but the spouse had a premonition to go to a certain place where a rescue could be made in just enough time! Another person I knew about shot himself in the head. It should have been fatal, but it only blinded him. As a result, he came to know God and experienced a whole new life with a new set of spiritual eyes. And,

of course, there are people who succeed. But the point is that it's ultimately not up to us if God says it's not our day.

And when I come to you again, you will have even more reason to take pride in Christ Jesus because of what he's doing through me. Paul was so sure he would live and get out of jail that he made plans to visit these Philippians in the future, claiming that they would take pride (the right kind) in seeing Paul continue his work with them.

Citizens of heaven (1:27a)

Now Paul puts this all into perspective. *Above all you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a way that is worthy of the Good News about Jesus.* You might think he would say, "Above all, you gotta live pure and blameless lives," as he told them previously. But here he tells them what kind of mindset to have and in what realm they should live in their minds and hearts – a heavenly one. This does not mean we should be idealistic and ignore how the world around us really is. Instead, it is about getting that big perspective, a heavenly one, one that sees beyond this material world, enabling us to deal more successfully with the crazy world around us. In some ways, we're not associated (in our hearts, minds, and souls) with this world and all the limits it places on us. But in other ways, we are! Paul is just telling them to tap into that other realm, the one they can't see but know is there, and conduct themselves in a way that demonstrates they are aware of how far superior that heavenly (other) realm is. The personal power in doing this is what brings joy, peace, and freedom. The world we live in can easily *pull you down* and *pull you in*. Paul wanted them (and us as readers) to be citizens of that other realm, heaven, where God resides and reigns over his world in a very good and loving way.

Many people think *heaven* is a place, a location, out there somewhere far from here. And perhaps it is. No one can say for sure. But the way Paul (and others) present “heaven” in the New Testament seems to be beyond what we experience in this life. A realm (whether we understand it or not) that must exist to provide any meaning here in this earthly realm in which we all presently live. Heaven is at least some kind of other dimension. We all sense that something of this nature exists, even though we cannot see it directly or visit there ... except, perhaps, by faith.

I don't know if the world will have the same real estate and waterways as it now has, but apparently, when reading the New Testament, God will re-create the world and give us new, indestructible, perfect, everlasting bodies. I do not know of any place in the New Testament where it says that we're gonna go to heaven and float around as a spirit without a body until the resurrection occurs. However, some passages can be interpreted to say this, and it certainly is a possibility that the body and soul can exist separately, as Plato first taught. However, the Jews and their Old Testament writings never taught this (except for one passage in the book of Job). We're going to be resurrected with a re-created body that's perfect. If we correctly understand how the body works, looking into anatomy and science, the body seems to be designed to live forever! It re-creates all our cells about every seven years. If that process worked perfectly (no cancer, defects, and ill-effects of aging) like it probably did initially before humanity fell into sin, people would have lived forever. We weren't designed to die. But considering where we are today in this world of pain, agony, and struggle, it's actually a blessing from God that we die and get to leave this mess behind. We'll be resurrected into a brand new, perfect world and a perfect body where everyone will be reconciled to God and to each other. It is going to be good, and it will be everything God ultimately intended for the world he so loves.

It is hard for a lot of people to believe this. To them, it just seems too good to be true. But ultimate goodness and eventually making everything right is not too hard for God, who created the world with a good purpose. If it is that good, it can only be God bringing it about. Should we expect any less than perfection from him? And that's why the New Testament says things like, "God will reconcile everything to himself in heaven and earth." There's going to be a new creation and new bodies. And so, according to Paul, we need to live as citizens of that other realm (heaven), even though we're not there yet. Our mind, heart, and perspective all need to be heavenly-oriented. It's not just about having a place to go when we die. It's a spiritual realm where God exists, has existed, and will continue to exist for all eternity. As Jesus said, "The Kingdom of heaven is near, and it's within you." It's closer than we think!

This message of Good News is that Jesus died on the cross, and we can put our trust in him. He died to save humanity and take away the sins of the world. And now, as a result, you can put your trust in God and have a better life and relationship with him. And so, we can now "live in a manner worthy of that Good News message about Jesus." The gospel is not so much "Do this, and don't do that" and "You must keep the Ten Commandments." It's an announcement of what God has *already* done for us! So, Paul encourages his readers (and us) to live in a manner worthy of understanding what God did for us, not to live in a manner worthy of keeping the Ten Commandments and the other laws. There are a lot of people trying to live that way. They don't call it "legalism," but that's essentially what it is. The whole book of Galatians is about *not going back* under the law. Why on earth would anyone go back now that they've begun with the Spirit? Why would anyone choose to live under the law? It can't do anything for them except make them miserable and prove them to be failures. But some people love the drama and trauma. In a strange way, they get addicted to it. This is why Paul wrote,

“Above all, you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ.” That's a good way to live!

Fighting together for the faith (1:27b)

Then, whether I come and see you again or only hear about you, I will discover that you are standing in unity with one spirit and one purpose, fighting together for the faith. Paul knew – well, he was planning on it – to see them sometime in the future. But seeing them or not really didn't matter, according to Paul. What mattered was the reality of the spiritual unity they had with each other, standing and fighting together to maintain their mutually held faith. They were not fighting each other, as was the case in other churches Paul wrote to (like the church in Corinth.) He saw these Philippians as having one purpose, one spirit, fighting together for the faith, which is the Good News about Jesus. For Paul, it always comes back down to the Gospel, the Good News, that message about Jesus coming, dying on the cross, and bringing life to everyone. Whether people realize it or not, whether they understand it or not, whether they want it or not, Jesus by his life and death says, “I'm doing this for humanity because I love my creation and because it needs to be done. Once this sin problem is resolved, we'll go from there in this life (and in eternity), reconciling everybody to me and making everything right.” Knowing this is the only way I can live with all the evil and injustice in the world – and stay sane! A lot of what goes on in this world is just disgusting. It's horrible. And if God allows evil, never makes things right, and leaves everything wrong forever – that's really depressing. That's not much of a God. That's a God who creates the world, lets it fall into sin, saves a few people (because that's all he is *able* to save, or *wants* to save),

and then lets everything stay wrong for eternity! What kind of God and Savior is that?

Many people will say, “That’s what God can do if he wants.” But I have no reason to conclude that he would ever settle for such failure on his part. And I have every reason, based on all that is said about the high moral character of God and his unlimited power and goodness, to conclude that he will succeed at what he clearly intends to do – to save the whole world, all of creation! I think he will be successful in saving this world for at least two good reasons. First, because it needs to be saved. But second, because he so loves it. Put these two together, and we will experience nothing but success on the part of God. And this is why Paul refers to the “simplicity of the gospel.” It is not “simplistic,” but it is *simple*. It is not complicated. It is basic. It is pure salvation for all who need it. So, Paul commends them for standing together in one spirit, one purpose, and fighting for the faith, which is the Good News.

7. Struggling and Suffering (Philippians 1:28-30)

Don't be intimidated (1:28)

Paul moves on to a new thought. Oh, this is interesting. *Don't be intimidated in any way by your enemies.* He did not say, "Don't have any apprehension or fear." That would be near impossible since these are feelings. But not allowing intimidation is an act of the will. We have more control of this. Paul had plenty of reason for fear and intimidation when he was in jail – a place from which he wrote several of his letters. Every time the guards moved him to another cell, he didn't know if he was gonna get his head cut off, beat, or ignored. But he didn't let them intimidate him because intimidation means you're letting people change your behavior, how you feel, or what you think and speak. So, we can have some fear and apprehension, but when we stick with the Good News message and all it brings, we can choose not to be intimidated and keep trusting God. We can tell people, "I'm not changing. No matter what you do, I will not be intimidated – even if I experience some fear and apprehension." Such feelings are normal and are not sin. Even Jesus asked his Father, "I'm anxious about the cross. Can this *cup* of anguish pass from me? As a human being, I don't want to go through this if I do not need to. But, Father, may your will be

done!” So even Jesus experienced anxiety and apprehension. But he obeyed his Father and didn't let those who threatened him also intimidate him. They couldn't change his behavior, beliefs, or his trust in his Father, no matter how they made him feel.

This will be an indication to them that they are going to be destroyed and that you are going to be saved by God himself. Here's another good example of a verse that people will read into it what they've been taught. Most religious people will interpret it this way: “This will be an indication to them that they are going to hell and that you are going to heaven.” This is because we all tend to impose on anything we read, whatever we have been taught. People seldom look up the meanings of words as they occur in the original language of the ancient text they are reading. In fact, we don't even think about it. We let it mean whatever we have been told that it means and never question it. In this verse, for example, the word *destroy* literally means “to be taken apart and completely disabled.” There is no eternal aspect in this word. However, it could be used in this way by a writer, but there would need to be some kind of indication in the surrounding words (the immediate context) that this is the author's intent. That certainly is not the case here.

In John 3:16, the Greek word “destroy” is also used, and there is an aspect of eternity in the context of that verse (“whoever believes will not perish but have eternal life”). Two observations are in order. First, most translators use the word *perish* instead of *destroy*. Why? One can only speculate, but it seems that this English word is chosen because it better supports the assumption of never-ending punishment by God that is popular today in Protestant, Evangelical, and Catholic churches. But it is, actually, the word “destroy” in the original Greek text, and this word is usually translated as “destroy” in most other occurrences in the New Testament. “Perish” is a more dramatic and traumatic

English word, so it is perhaps chosen to provide a better image of some kind of eternal punishment.

But the second thing worth noting is that the word *eternal* in John 3:16 is actually the word for “age,” or literally, “indefinite time period.” The Greek word “forever” is used only twice in the New Testament. Most translators use the word *eternal* here, which is a bit misleading. (Paul used this Greek word, *forever* once, in Romans 1:20. And Jude used it once in his letter.) The word *age* is used in all other locations, but most translators use the English word *eternal*. And that is okay if the word “everlasting” is not substituted in the reader’s mind – which is usually what happens. The Greek word “age” has more to do with *orientation* than *duration*. In other words, “eternal life” in John 3:16 is more about “life associated with the age to come” (an indefinite time period) than life that is never-ending. However, even though we do not understand the very nature of time, it is reasonable to expect life after death will be never-ending. The point here is that this is not the basic meaning of the Greek word *age*. It simply means “an indefinite period of time.” So, it is easy to see how any of us can be indoctrinated into believing something that may not be exactly right if we do not take the time to investigate things and not just blindly accept them from those who have been installed as “experts” in some religious setting.

One of my reasons for attending and graduating from Seminary was to pull back the mysterious curtain at church and find out what was happening behind the scenes. Doing that, along with my own in-depth self-study for the past 45 years, has revealed a lot more than I ever bargained for and a lot more information than I was ever given at church or seminary. The point is that if you want to know all the facts, think for yourself, and draw your own conclusions that are verifiable ... you gotta do your homework! It takes time and effort, but it is well worth it. The peace of knowing *why* I believe what I do (and not just blindly trusting others) is golden!

Difficult and hard as it is, people are drawn to drama and trauma when it comes to life. This is why hell, damnation, punishment, retaliation, revenge, and annihilation are so effective in religious environments. Most religions have some kind of dualistic view of God. That is, there is a good and bad aspect to who God is. Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and early Christianity (before the Fourth Century) are all exceptions. But Paganism, Judaism, Islam, Roman Catholicism, and modern Evangelicalism are all dualistic. They see God as both loving and vindictive, combining heavenly bliss and never-ending torment (or annihilation) as the two final destinations for all humanity. Don't get me wrong, early Christians believed in judgment, condemnation, and punishment by God. But they saw God's punishment as corrective in nature, always acting *for* us, not *against* us. Any condemnation was God declaring that we are not good enough by his perfect standard and that we are in desperate need of restoration and salvation – not just to be discarded like an old, soiled, worthless garment. And judgment? That is simply God making an “accurate assessment” of us and our fallen condition. This is what the word judgment means. It does not mean to send someone to hell forever! So, everything God does is good and has a good (and only good) purpose.

So, Paul is telling his readers not to be intimidated by their enemies because it will make them think through why their intimidation is not working and that they are the ones who will be destroyed. He also wants them to know *why* their enemies will not win. It's because they have something far superior to that of their enemies, who may very well start thinking, “Wow, I'm headed for some kind of destruction, some kind of failure. Maybe these people we are trying to intimidate will be saved by God!” Keep in mind that anytime you see the word *saved* in the New Testament, it's the word *delivered*. It does not mean escaping hell – although it could if the writer indicated this in the context of the other words he uses. “Saved,” in Greek, simply means to be

delivered from something. So, when you see this word *saved*, always ask yourself, “Delivered from what?” What is the author trying to say, based on the context? Don’t assume, don’t read into it, and give God the benefit of any doubt, knowing he is always good, always has a good purpose in all he does, desires all to be saved (delivered), and will never abandon his desire to save humanity that he so loves!

The privilege of suffering (1:29)

Paul goes on to write, *You have been given both the privilege of trusting Christ and also the privilege of suffering for him.* Whoa, wait a minute! Suffering is a privilege? I like having the privilege of *trusting* Christ, but have we also been given the privilege of *suffering* for him? Are these two indelibly linked? Yep. Part of trusting God is enduring suffering for him. Paul does not see suffering as an unnecessary waste of time. Instead, he sees suffering as a privilege! That’s either crazy or amazingly profound. Many spiritual truths are hard to see, hard to learn, and beyond our natural inclinations. Trusting is usually a choice we make. Suffering is usually not a choice and is usually imposed on us. Which one (trusting or suffering) is harder to do? If we can trust God, we can also choose to endure suffering for him.

Now, keep in mind that honorable suffering is not being an annoying Evangelical (or Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, or Agnostic) and reaping the scorn of others we bring on ourselves. A little time spent on Facebook will make this abundantly clear. Sometimes Christians unnecessarily ask for the persecution they get. But amazingly, it makes them feel all the more special in their own mind, standing up for *the truth* at all costs. Occasionally, this genuinely happens, but all too often, it is just people being people, arrogant, condescending, pompous, and so proud of themselves.

It is not for any of us to judge, but one cannot help but notice when people seem to make religious fools of themselves, unknowingly. This is a long way from genuine persecution that comes from loving people unconditionally, living humbly, taming the tongue (as James suggests), and setting an example of kindness. Doing this often makes people angrier than just about anything. Look at the life of Jesus, who he was, what he did, and how he spoke. His death is an accurate picture of true suffering and enduring persecution. His disciples and those in the early Christian church (before the Fourth Century) seemed to be this kind of humble followers of Jesus, who considered suffering a privilege. The New Testament book of Acts records in chapter five that, “They rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor in the name of Jesus.”

What kind of people are these? It seems I still have a long way to go before I get to the point of having that perspective on suffering as a privilege! Some of the suffering in the early church was extreme. They were torn apart by lions as entertainment for the cruel, bloodthirsty, compassionless, Godless, pagan masses. Some people today think football is far too brutal of a sport! However, some in the early church took the privilege of suffering seriously. They welcomed it and taught their kids to put their trust in God, expect it, and prepare for such a life as they faced being burned alive as martyrs.

This seems a bit extreme to me and borders on crazy, but I respect their decision, realizing I do not have to live as they did and do not really know what I might decide had I walked in their shoes. Facing suffering sets the whole tone of their life and their perspective about who God is. They weren't attached to their big cars, fancy homes, and going to Disneyland. Nothing wrong with any of those things, but that's not how they lived, and these kinds of things did not get in their way. I have often pondered who is better off – us, or them? Life is not really *about* this life – but it does *include* this life! Life is about something much more, a

meaning perhaps harder to find in our modern-day society. Would I trade places with them? No way. I am too big of a chicken. Would they trade with us? Hard to say. They might claim, "I would never choose to go through any of this, even though the lessons learned were great and my relationship with God was close." Sometimes the best things in life are forced on us, not chosen; all we can do is endure and benefit.

Life can't really be all about *this* life because we're not going to stay here. We feel like it when we're young because we know we probably have lots of years left. Death seems so far away and unreal. Death is what old people do. But old people were all once young, and we slowly creep toward that day when it's time to go. For most people, it sneaks up on them. And I suppose that is okay. We are not supposed to sit around and think about dying. We are supposed to live life to the fullest; it is a precious gift from God. But we are also wise to stay mindful of the inevitable and allow it to temper our words and behavior accordingly. Only a fool lives like there is *no tomorrow* to deal with.

But you know what? Eventually, we're all checking out of here, and as we get older, we hit up against that reality. But, if we're wise, we will conclude as Paul did, "I'm ready to die. I can stay, or I can go. I'm good with it because either way, I win." I figure that if I stay, love my family, do some teaching and writing, play music, and love people, I hope they might see some glimmer of Christ in me. Oh, but to move on into the inevitable eternal realm and be with God who created me and loves me more than I will ever know ... that is even better! Thank you, Paul, for such wonderful insight that you brought into my life.

Struggling together (1:30)

We are in this struggle together. You have seen me struggle in the past, and you know that I continue to do so. Paul's not a guy preaching a sermon who went off into his

pastoral chamber and prepared it via prayer. Nothing is wrong with that, but that's not what's happening here. This is a guy who was nearly stoned to death, shipwrecked, beaten, lashed just short of death, spent a lot of time in chains on a cold, dirty prison floor, and was hunted by Jewish leaders who hated him and probably had a bounty on his head. There was no cushy ministerial life for this guy! Yet we also read about him singing hymns with Silas while in prison. People saw this, heard about it, and they could not help but be encouraged and impressed because Paul lived what he preached. They took a look at him and said, “Man, oh man, how does this guy keep his faith? Ya know what, I think I can handle the puny suffering that I experience while trusting God and identifying with Jesus.”

Philippians is a great letter that Paul has written. There are so many memorable, helpful, and encouraging passages. Perhaps you have read this Philippian letter before. Do you recall some or most of it? Are you discovering new things or seeing old things in a new light? Maybe it's turning out a little better than you remembered. Every time I go through this letter, even as I write this commentary, it always seems better than I had remembered. I think this is because I didn't (and couldn't) understand it all in the past. Today, I am a different person, having lived a few years longer than the last time I read it, and I am able to see more, understand more, appreciate more, and gain more from one more journey through this short and passionate letter by Paul.

Reading things like this and just experiencing more of life makes us much more aware of how good and great God is. We grow, and then we're ready for the next level of seeing what's already there in this letter. Sometimes, I read something again and think, “I don't remember seeing that idea before. Where did that come from?” But it was always there. I just didn't understand it because I hadn't lived long enough to appreciate it and relate it to life. I read Philippians when I was a young Christian, probably in my 20s or 30s, and I knew it was a great book. But I didn't know

what it was all about because I needed to do more living and experience more trouble and joy. However, as limited as my understanding was back then, I got all I needed from reading this letter for the first time. It helped me find where I was in life and what was going on. I still needed to mess up, raise kids, struggle in jobs, discover new friends, and experience all that life brings. But all of it made me appreciate this Philippian letter all the more and helped me understand what life is really all about. It helped me put it all in perspective. I hope it does this for you, too. This could be said for any of Paul's letters, and for all of the New Testament writings, and maybe even for many good and insightful books today.

8. Working Together with One Mind (Philippians 2:1-3a)

Any comfort in God's love? (2:1a)

Chapter Two of Paul's letter to the Philippians is very interesting. It starts out with yet another one of those memorable passages to which I've been calling attention. Paul writes, *Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Is there any comfort from his love?* Wow ... good questions! Isn't this the bottom line about anything we believe in life? Is there any value in it, or are we just believing what we do because it is what we were taught over and over all our lives, and it seems right because it is so familiar? Is there any comfort in knowing that God loves us? Think about the masses of people who say, "Yeah, God loves me, but he's also going to torment most of humanity forever, and I can't help but wonder about his love for me."

Most religions are *dualistic*. That is, they believe God is both really good and yet also really bad (when he needs to be). Modern-day Christianity (Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical) is no exception. Most religions are works-oriented. They believe people must do something to get on the good side of God and, therefore, avoid some kind of punishment that is due to them for falling short of some standard they've been taught. In the case of most Evangelicals, who are a very large part of modern-day

Christianity, faith is substituted for works in what is required to ward off anger and punishment from God. But this is, really, just a form of working for salvation. As soon as anyone inserts any kind of requirement, either action or disposition, to gain some kind of salvation, it is no longer *grace*. Grace is an unmerited favor with God, disappearing as soon as any requirement is inserted.

This is a popular view (and I was taught this at seminary) to claim that faith is a *non-meritorious work*. This is completely in line with the essence of what grace is. When we believe there is no earning aspect to it. Faith is just our *proper response* to God, accepting what he has *already* done for us! But though many claim faith to be non-merit in nature, they treat it, live it, and preach it like it is the one thing people must do for God to save them. Repeatedly, the New Testament teaches (particularly Paul) that faith makes us right with God. The common word used for “make right” in many translations is *justified*. They often take this to mean that when we exercise faith, God relents of his plan to punish us as sinners eternally and considers us perfect based on the atonement of Jesus ... but it’s only applied to those who choose to believe. Therefore, a lack of belief results in eternal damnation in hell, and belief becomes required. Doing this moves salvation out of the realm of grace.

Paul consistently presents salvation as something received *by grace* and faith as the way we experience this salvation that God has *already* done for all humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In this way, our faith has “made us right” (justified us) with God without being any kind of merit or earning on our part. Instead, it is coming into a right relationship with God. Yet, *meritorious faith* is where most Evangelical Christians are in their thinking because they believe that their act of faith exempts them from God doing something horrible to them in eternity. It puts the whole burden of salvation back on themselves. Jesus only made them *saveable* (as I was taught at seminary), even though they claim salvation is by grace. They use

words like *grace*, but the bottom line is they believe that they must do something (belief) to be saved because that is what qualifies them to be exempt from God doing something horrible to them in eternity.

I once knew somebody who was a pastor's wife, and when she was dying, she was questioning whether she believed enough and did enough while serving God all her life. The doubts were not huge, but they were present. She was a modern-day Evangelical who believed that her own personal act of faith was the one requirement for salvation and that all who did not believe were destined by God for never-ending torment as their due punishment. Actually, her doubts about her salvation were warranted, based on her disposition about the essential role faith played in her life. And she is not alone. Countless Christians, secretly or openly, experience some doubt about their salvation. They know God loves them, but “just how much” is what they ask themselves. They know Jesus died for them, but just how completely, they are not sure. They know believing is the key, but they wonder if they have believed enough, believed the right things, were sincere enough, and believed with enough good works to prove they had a *saving* faith (as James warns about in his letter). That’s a lot to live with and even more to die with! Only grace – that work by God through Jesus and his cross – is the sure solution. It is not that believing doesn’t matter – it does, plenty. But it does not, and cannot, earn anything with God. Faith only brings us into a right and good relationship with God when we realize that salvation was *already* done completely and fully for us by God. Only God doing *all* the saving, leaving nothing to be done by fallen creatures who need to be saved, is the kind of salvation that is sure and secure. Anything short of that still depends on us and brings an element of doubt and worry.

With a true understanding of grace, we know that God is greater than our human mind and heart. But when we’ve been taught “salvation by faith (instead of grace), and we conclude that

we are required to do something – anything – we slip back in under The Law because there is still, in our mind, a condition that we've got to meet in order for God to love us, accept us, and save us. So only in grace and not works of any kind – including the meritorious work of faith – is there any real encouragement and comfort. Otherwise, we are ultimately left to depend on ourselves and suffer the agony of doubt, worry, discomfort, and discouragement.

Any fellowship in the Spirit? (2:1b)

Paul continues, *Any fellowship together in the spirit?* Yes, this is great. We all love fellowshiping together in the Spirit, loving each other, and helping each other get through life. We're doing it! *Are your hearts tender and compassionate?* Oh, Paul, did you have to ask that? Yes, usually. But this is sometimes hard to do, especially when we start having trouble with other people, which is inevitable. It's just a matter of time. And so, the question for us is, “Are we tender-hearted and compassionate with each other?”

This is a good question because there are many people who, surprisingly, over many years, including myself, are not very compassionate, especially in difficult situations. In days gone by, I've been less compassionate and tender-hearted than I should have been. Looking back, it was usually because I was too “religious.” When something happened, or somebody offended me, compassion and tender-heartedness were about the last things to come out of me, if at all! I see this in a lot of people who are believers, and they don't appear to be tender and compassionate. However, we cannot judge anyone's heart, which we cannot see, but we can judge the words and behaviors we can see. Even then, we must be careful and ensure we have all the facts, which is almost never the case.

I have observed that when some people are agitated in some way, when they get under pressure, their faith seems to not always sustain them. Could it be because their faith was in their *act of believing* rather than the object of their belief – God himself? When things are going well, we're going to church, life is going well, we can easily say, "We love God. He's so wonderful. He's so gracious." But then, what happens when things get tough? Are we able to be compassionate and tender-hearted? That is something that's deep inside of us ... or not. It's not something we can fake. In fact, it's something that *will* come out of us when things get tough. It will not be something we have to force out of ourselves. Compassion and tender-heartedness will naturally flow and will become your mode of operation. When you see this in yourself, especially when you remember your *old self* where you used to live, you realize God's work in your life since then. This is the very thing that makes you now turn to God all the more and say, "God, I love you, you love me, and what have you got for me in this difficulty? What can I learn? I'm here, listening. I'm living on the edge, waiting for what you have next for me." This is a different mindset and lifestyle, one rooted in trusting God for everything, including our complete salvation by his grace. Paul wants his readers (and us) to consider whether we are truly tender-hearted and compassionate. That's important.

So, Paul has asked them, "Are you comforted by God's love? Are you fellowshiping together in His Spirit? Are you tender-hearted and compassionate?" Well, if so ... *Then make me joyful by agreeing completely with each other, loving each other, and working together with one mind and purpose.* This was a constant problem for people in that day, just as it is for us today. Think of all the times you have tried so hard to get along with other people, at church, at work, at home – and you genuinely desire to do so – yet you find it so hard, especially with certain people. Well, I'm willing to bet they think the same thing.

We are all fallen creatures, and none of us are all that easy to get along with. Acquaintances are easy, friends are harder, and those closest to us are usually the hardest. And why? Well, it's because we spend most of our time with them. We know them, and they know us all too well. Someone has wisely said, "When you first meet someone, you don't really meet them ... you meet their *representative!*" Another wise saying is, "Everyone is normal ... until you get to know them." Half of the problem is that we are all flawed to the core of our being, and it cannot be hidden for long. However, the other half of the problem is that our perception of others is also flawed. Put these two facts together in any kind of group setting, and there will be trouble. We see it all around us every day, and we seem unable to avoid it, no matter how hard we try.

I remember when I was much younger, I was growing in my relationship with God; I wanted to love people more and experience less trouble. Well, this worked, but only to some degree. First, I cannot perfectly love people. But second, neither can they! All we can do is love the best we can, keep doing it even when others do not love us back, and keep on loving! I was surprised at how hard this was to do even though the idea of loving people is pretty simple.

Sometimes, people at church, in general, get along okay because it's only for an hour or so each week. Put us all in the same house and ... watch out! Or, people working at church in the same office every day ... watch out for that, too. The closer we are to people, and the more time we spend with them, the greater the opportunity for trouble. In these situations, we have to work harder at it, and it is when we find out who we really are. But Paul just wants to encourage people to do well in these difficult situations. God wants this, too! He is saying to them, "Hey, if you know all these things about God, and if he's working in your life and there is a spirit of togetherness and you are compassionate, then work hard at loving and seek to have the

same purpose and goal in life. If you do, I will be thrilled. Not just for me but for you, too!”

Paul knows very well that being one-minded in purpose is a pretty hard thing to do. In fact, it's almost impossible to do consistently. But Paul can't claim that it matters just because it is hard to do. No, he's gonna tell them that they need to do this and that they need to be aware of this. I don't think he's saying this is a law they must keep and that if they don't keep it, they're going to hell or be annihilated. He's just saying. This should be the natural outcome of walking with God, knowing him, and being encouraged by him. When God is fully present in your life, you are aware of it and maintain a big perspective. Loving others and unifying with them becomes much easier to do. Maybe not every minute of every day, and it's not that you'll never have trouble with anyone. But when you do have trouble, you'll catch it early, and you'll say, “Oh, what am I doing? Hey, please forgive me!” People living in the Spirit, maintaining the big picture in life (from God's perspective), are able to catch themselves early and get along with people more often than not.

Don't be selfish (2:3a)

Paul continued his encouragement of the Philippians. *Don't be selfish. Don't try to impress others.* In other words, don't make it about yourself. As for impressing others, we all want to do that, in big or small ways. Most people have had kids, and everyone has been a kid. Impressing Mom and Dad is really important ... up to a certain age. Ha! But even my adult kids, when they accomplish something, want to tell us about it. That's all normal. We all need appreciation, acceptance, and affirmation. It has a lot to do with our desire to be relevant and to somehow make a difference in life.

But there is a point where we are trying to impress people for ego's sake. It is all about *us* trying to satisfy our sense of insecurity.

Have you ever met someone who seems to always be giving their resume? Here's what happens when you try to impress others. It gets you by for a while, but soon enough, after people have recognized and praised you for your abilities and achievements, they go on with their lives and don't keep on praising you. Or, if they do, it gets old. Once you have impressed a few people (and it's never everyone) and received rinky-dink feedback, you start asking, "So what?" What's next? This is why rock stars end up taking drugs after they get up in front of thousands, everyone's cheering them on, and they are seen by some as almost god-like. But after they got used to it, and the *new* has worn off – in other words, they impressed their admirers – they can't help but conclude, "This is not as great as I thought it would be!" So, they take some drugs to feel a thrill again. The other thing I think they go through after the thrill wears off is realizing that all those admirers don't really know them. They're cheering for them about something that's totally superficial. Sure, they can play guitar and sing, but if all those people out there knew them, they would discover how ordinary they really are. Deep down inside, they know they are not worthy of all the praise they get. That depresses a lot of them.

I have a counseling friend who calls this *imposter syndrome*. They're asking, "Am I just going through life faking it?" This is the insecurity most people have, but it gets amplified when they are trying to impress people. Without our identity located squarely in God, we will never have a satisfying identity that brings us real peace and freedom. And so, Paul warns his readers not to be selfish, trying to impress others. It is a dead-end road that has the illusion of greatness in ourselves.

After warning about being selfish and trying to impress others, Paul adds this: **Be humble**. Humility is simply saying, "You know what? I don't know for sure. And even though I think I know, I realize I could be wrong." I don't mean we need to be

insecure and completely uninformed. But it seems that true humility says, “Ya know, I’m just as human as the next guy. And yeah, I have these strong convictions, but I could be mistaken.” After finding out I was mistaken about many things, it was very humbling. I never saw it coming at 60 years old! So, I’ve learned to stay humble and say, “I’m willing to listen to anybody and look into anything.” This doesn’t mean I don’t have strong, genuine convictions; I do. It just means that I’m open and can afford to rethink my beliefs. Part of true humility is not thinking we’ve got it all figured out and that everybody else is an idiot, heretic, false teacher, or deceived. That’s usually how people react when they are insecure about what they believe, haven’t checked things out carefully, and are afraid of finding out they might be wrong. So, Paul is encouraging his readers to *be humble*.

9. Ultimate Humility (Philippians 2:3b-11)

Carefully consider other people (2:3b)

In verse five, below, Paul will make some huge statements about Jesus, his attitude toward others, and about himself. So, to set up his readers, he starts with this: *Think of others as better than yourself*. No one is really better than anyone else – at least not in value and worthiness to God. God loves everyone equally, unconditionally, and infinitely. He can never love people any more or less than he does. However, some people are indeed better at certain skills and abilities than others. Paul knew this. But Paul is after something far more important. Our attitude toward others (and therefore our attitude toward ourselves) greatly affects our lives.

We need to have an attitude and disposition of lifting up other people, and here's why. We all think we're better than others, at least in some aspects of life. Some people believe they are better in every way possible. Many of them are politicians, and some are religious leaders. In another letter, Paul wrote, “Do not think higher of yourself than you ought to think.” Interestingly, he doesn't tell his readers what he means by “higher than you ought.” Perhaps he knows we are aware when we cross that line – if we want to know. “Don't be thinking higher of yourself than you know you should,” is perhaps what Paul is saying.

In this passage, Paul exhorts his readers to place others higher in their thinking than they do themselves. Notice he does not say to view ourselves as *lower* than others. That is not the focus. It should be on others rather than us. This is all very Jesus-like, as we shall see in verse five below. Such an attitude requires an *accurate* self-estimation. Paul never tells his readers to love themselves; elsewhere, he acknowledges that people tend to do this but never calls it a sin. Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he tells husbands to “Love your wife as you do your own body.” We all tend to love ourselves, and it's okay because we need to care for ourselves. When we have the right attitude about this, we love ourselves so that we can also take care of and help others.

But life shouldn't be all about us. Here's the way I look at it. If you work on trying to see others as *better* than yourself, you might end up thinking they're *equal* to you because your estimation of how well you do something (like loving others) tends to be better than it actually is. I've discovered this in my marriage. Instead of trying to go fifty/fifty with others, shoot for seventy-five/seventy-five. In other words, do what seems to be more than half. Don't just try to meet in the middle because it will never actually be the 50% you are shooting for. Instead, it will be about 35%, and there will be a gap. But if you shoot for going 75% of the way toward somebody else, you have a much better chance of actually reaching 50% – even though you will swear you are going far above and beyond. For example, if two people each try to go 75% of the way in their marriage, they might meet in the middle at 50%. But if they both shoot for 50%, it will really be about 35%, and there will be a gap. And so Paul, in the same way, encourages people to “think of others as better than yourself,” knowing that they will at least see others as equal.

Paul then adds this, *Don't just look out for your own interests but take an interest in others, too.* It's okay to have

an interest in yourself and watch out for your own finances, your well-being, your enjoyment in life, being creative, learning to play an instrument, having hobbies, or whatever you like to do. There's nothing wrong with any of that. But don't make it *all* about such self-centered things. Some people are always going somewhere, doing something, always staying busy, and never slowing down. It is as if they are running away from something. Many are afraid of the quietness of their own hearts and thoughts.

Sometimes I like to just sit and ponder. For me, it is a healthy and important time to sort things out, readjust priorities, and conclude important things about life. But for some people, this is agony and torment. They constantly push things out of their minds, or at least to the back parts. According to Paul, it's okay to look out for your own interests (in the right way), but make sure you are considering the interests of others, too. See if there are ways that you can help them to become a better person.

Take on the attitude of Jesus (2:5)

All that Paul has written so far is his way of setting up his readers for some huge conclusions about Jesus. He starts by telling them that they need to be like him. *You must have the same attitude Christ Jesus had.* I do not think Paul is giving them a requirement as much as he is saying that having the same humble attitude that Jesus had will be the natural result of believing in him. That's what *will* happen. It's not a matter of, "You *must* try to be like him," which is impossible for us to do on our own.

But then Paul turns his attention to Jesus himself. What is this attitude in Jesus that we must also have? *Jesus being in the form of God, did not think of equality with God as something to be taken by force.* This passage is difficult to

interpret accurately since Paul does not explain it. However, the context in which it was written (Paul's surrounding words and ideas) is a big help. Always look at immediate (and even greater) context when trying to understand better what is written. Most authors are trying to reveal ideas, not hide them. So, consider a larger scope of information to read as one complete unit rather than just guessing at what one verse might mean. There is always a danger that we will make it say what we want rather than let Paul say what he wants.

The word Paul uses, often translated as "form," is the Greek word *morphe*, from which we get our English word *morphed*, which means *to change form slowly* (i.e., metamorphosis). Another possible translation is, "he appeared in the form of God." The idea of Jesus appearing as God is a little fuzzy, and what Paul is saying is unclear. Paul never says directly, "Jesus is God," but this is probably as close as it gets. He's not like John, who wrote many years later, "The Word (Jesus) was *with* God, and the Word *was* God." Paul seems to be a little more careful about it. In his letter to the Colossians, he wrote, "The fulness of deity dwelt in him (Jesus)." This is very close to, but not a direct identification of Jesus as being *fully* God himself.

The context of this passage in Philippians Two is humility and selflessness, and Paul uses Jesus as an example. This may be the best explanation for Paul saying, "He did not think of equality with God as something to be taken by force." However, this statement about Jesus can also be taken in the opposite way. Paul could be saying that because Jesus was equal with God, this equality was not something he had to take by force because it was something he already fully possessed. However, the context of humility and Paul wanting to use Jesus as a supreme example seems to favor the other view. Because Jesus was humble, he didn't have to try to make himself equal with the Father because true humility says, "I'm subject to my Father." In the Gospels, it records Jesus saying that the Father was greater than himself.

Some will explain this by saying that the Father was only greater while Jesus was in human form here on earth. They will also point out that Jesus said that he was “one with the Father.” However, the problem with this is that Jesus also invited his disciples to be *one* with him in the same way that he was *one* with the Father. Would that also make his disciples equal with God? So, this does not seem to be a very good argument; sticking with John 1:1 is probably smarter.

So, there are several ways to read this passage, but the context (as always) is probably our best friend in seeking an accurate interpretation. What is probably more important than trying to make this passage a proof-text for the equal deity of Jesus and the Father is to realize Paul’s purpose in the passage; it is quite simple: Jesus was humble and selfless, and so we should be!

Jesus gave up divine privileges (2:7)

Paul goes on to reveal Jesus’ humble, selfless attitude. *Instead, he gave up his divine privileges.* Divine privileges can be privileges *granted* by God, or they can be privileges inherent to someone *being* God. Paul does not say for sure which of these options is true, but he is saying that Jesus was something beyond us, and whatever resulting privileges he had were given up in some way to be human. This certainly implies that Jesus existed before he was human; otherwise, what is there to give up? The next verse seems to support this further.

He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. According to Paul, it seems that Jesus took on the form of humanity. Paul continues, *When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God.* The son is always obedient to his Father, never the other way around. Jesus was begotten of the Father. Just exactly *when* this happened has

been a debate throughout church history. It seems there are at least three possibilities. First, Jesus was begotten of God when he was physically born to Mary. In Mathew's Gospel, he says that Jesus was called "Son of God" because he was begotten of the Holy Spirit. So, Jesus was, at least, begotten in this way and at that time.

A second possibility is that Jesus existed and was begotten at some time in the past (before the world's creation) by God. Some will say that this indicates that Jesus was a created being with a beginning in time. Others will say that *begetting* is not the same as *creating* and that God begat Jesus from out of his own being, making Jesus of the *same substance* as the Father and not "created out of nothing," in the way all other created things are made. The Nicene Creed (325 AD) distinguishes between *same* and *similar* substance. The two Greek words used to make this distinction are spelled almost the same, except one word has an iota (a Greek letter) in it. This is where the saying "one iota of truth" came from.

A third view of the begetting of Jesus is that he is *eternally* begotten. In other words, God has always, persistently, begat Jesus in his pre-existing form; therefore, he has always existed with his Father. This was the conclusion drawn in the Creed of Constantinople in 381 AD when the Trinity (composed of an equal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) was officially declared for the first time. The big problem with this is that the New Testament never presents Jesus as *eternally begotten*. He is always declared to be the *only begotten* without any indication concerning duration.

The Father is never characterized as begotten, so in this way, the Son and the Father are not equal. Jesus is always presented in the New Testament as *subordinate* in some way to the Father, and not fully equal with him. This seemed to be the view held by early Christians before the Fourth Century when the church started holding Councils and defining the relationship between the Father and the Son in greater detail. Jesus is always seen as

obeying the Father and being subject to him. However, remember that obedience and servanthood are always big things with God. Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be the servant of all." Jesus becoming human, humbling himself, taking on human form, and being a servant is not worthless. It's actually a very high thing to do. And so, Paul wrote, "He humbled himself in obedience to God."

Paul goes on to write, *He died like a criminal on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor.* Humility and selflessness result in high honor and exaltation! Jesus is as high up there as anyone can get, and therefore some people would say he's completely equal with the Father in a *trinity* (tri-unity) relationship, along with the Holy Spirit. Others would say he's not quite there, but he's as close as you can get without being there. This debate was resolved near the end of the Fourth Century, but it was a decision forced on everyone, including Christian leaders of that day who disagreed. This decision was *not* made in the spirit of unity and seeking the truth together, humbly respecting the genuinely held views of fellow believers. This attitude of domination launched the monstrous Roman Catholic church that controlled ignorant people through fear and carried out the worst brutalities against anyone who might object to their dogma and think for themselves.

The name above all names (2:9b)

And so, what is Paul's conclusion to all of this? *God gave Jesus the name above all other names. Therefore, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow (in heaven and on earth and under the earth), and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.* In this passage, Paul emphasizes what we, and all people, *should* do based on who

Jesus is and what he has done for everyone. But it is not a requirement with hell as a consequence of refusal. There is a similar passage in Paul's letter to the Colossians that says God will "reconcile everything in heaven and earth to himself." This means that sometime in the future, everyone who was ever created will be bowing before God and confessing him as Lord. But God will not have his foot on anyone's throat saying, "You better get down and worship me." I think Hitler, Ted Bundy, the Unabomber, and all the worst people we can think of are going to be fighting their way to the front of the crowd, past all the pastors and people who lived a pretty good life, to fall down and thank God for the salvation they received purely by grace – something they know they didn't earn or deserve by any of their own making. They will be right in front, and it won't be God forcing them because they will fully realize the meaning of grace they had no clue about during their life. The persons who are forgiven the most will appreciate God the most.

This is an interesting passage about Jesus, his attitude, humility, willingness to see others greater than himself, and how he came and died for us (*with* us, and *as* us) was exalted by God to the highest possible place. So maybe Paul's point is that if Jesus can think of others higher than himself, we should also be able to. I love Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "Forgive others because God has forgiven you." This verse makes me say to myself, "Oh, wait a minute, I know how much God's forgiven me. How can I not forgive others?" Same thing here. If Jesus can be humble and be a servant to others in who he was and how he lived and was exalted by God to a high position because of it, then can't we at least start to do this in some small ways?

Notice how Paul started in Philippians Two with "Make me happy by loving one another and working together in one mind and purpose," because this was always a problem with people in the churches he wrote to. He was trying to get people to be humble and act in the best interest of others for their own benefit,

for the benefit of the church as a whole, for the benefit of people's happiness, not just to keep some commandment that God had required. Are we happy when we're fighting other people? No, but we do it anyway because it satisfies a selfish and miserable part of us. Things are going well when we get along with other people (hard as that is sometimes), and we experience that euphoria of knowing we've done what's right; there is no better satisfaction in life. It brings us real and lasting peace. It is so good! Some people, though, never get it. They just spend their whole life, fighting everyone all the time. They're just in the habit of it.

10. Results of Salvation (Philippians 2:12-16)

God is at work in you (2:12)

Dear friends, you always followed my instructions when I was with you, but now that I'm away, it's even more important. Work hard to show the results of your salvation. Obey God with deep reverence and fear because God is working in you, giving you the desire and power to do what pleases him. That's a lot to consider. He commends them for following his instructions and exhorts them to keep following them in his absence. Apparently, they slacked off when he was away. Hey, out of sight, out of mind! Right? We all tend to fall into this. It's why we need parents when we're young and why we all need a *boss*, even as adults. He did not want them to flip back like the Galatians did.

Telling them to work hard makes sense but notice the reason he gives for them to do this. It is to show, to demonstrate, in what way their salvation has been successful. He also does not tell them to work hard to gain or earn their salvation! This is because salvation is by grace and is a free gift from God so that it can result in good works of helping others. Paul spells this out clearly in his letter to the Ephesians. He also wants them to obey God and do it with deep reverence for him, not just casually. Doing this in this way is for their benefit, not God's. God is, for sure,

pleased when we obey him, but what *we* gain from it also pleases God, not just exercising hard, cold obedience. God wants everyone to have a good, fruitful, enjoyable, and successful life in which they better understand God and themselves.

But Paul also says to “obey God with fear.” Really? Why would God want that? Fear, for fear’s sake, accomplishes nothing, and God is not so petty that he takes delight in seeing people cower in the corner just to make him feel bigger. He doesn’t need any of that nonsense. God is totally secure in who he is. He need not prove anything to anyone. He only wants people to discover how big he is so they can fully trust him and live in real peace and true freedom. This kind of *fear* has more to do with healthy respect and realizing where we would be without God. Such a lofty thought strikes the right kind of fear in anyone aware of how difficult life is and how limited we all are in our ability to save ourselves in any way.

The wrong kind of fear leads a person to think, “Oh no, God’s going to do something terrible to me.” But as we read on in what Paul has written and consider this whole letter to the Philippians, it becomes clear that God is always *for* us and never *against* us, even when it looks that way to us. Look at how Paul concludes this passage, “... because God is working in you, giving you the desire and power to do what pleases him.” Wow! That is the bottom line. This is always God’s good goal for us. It’s almost like an *awe-struck* fear. It’s not a fear of cowering in the corner. It’s more like, “Holy Moly, God is at work in me, giving me the desires and the power to do what he knows is best for me, which is what pleases him!” That realization strikes awesome reverence in us, and I suppose you could call it “fear,” but it is the good kind. It’s not the fear of, “I’m afraid of what God’s going to do to me.” Instead, it’s a fear of, “Wow, what would it be like if I didn’t have God in my life, giving me the desires I need and the power to fulfill them?”

But isn't it interesting that God is the one “working in us, to *will* and to *do*” (as one translation puts it)? Now, that doesn't mean we're not involved, but it does mean God gets the credit. He's the one that's generating the right desires and strength we need. When we let him, the Holy Spirit works in our lives, bringing that desire and strength. All we can do is allow him to work in our lives. Sometimes he works in us despite ourselves! God ultimately gets the credit for any success we have. However, I know I am not on *autopilot*, where my arm moves up, and I put it around my wife because I love her. I'm involved in my choice. I get to participate in what God is doing. Never get that reversed.

He's at work to affect our will, emotions, mind, and thinking to do what pleases him. And what pleases him is what's good for us. God's not up there saying, “Okay, you guys, get it together. I want to be pleased. You've gotta start doing things right so I can feel good about myself.” No. Instead, he wants *us* to do well. And when we do well, he is pleased that by that, just like we are with our kids when we see them do well in life. I never wanted my kids cowering in the corner, afraid of me, trying to appease me so I would not do something horrible to them just to try to regain the honor that they robbed me of. I never thought, “They must obey me, no matter what.” The only reason I disciplined them was because I loved them, and I wanted them to do well.

It wasn't about me. It was about them. And for God, it's not about himself, it's about us! Rick Warren starts out his famous book *The Purpose Driven Life* with, “It's not about you.” I know what he's getting at, and it's a good book. He is saying that our focus needs to be on God, but not for God's sake ... for ours! We do better when we focus on God and not ourselves. Yet, in another way of thinking, it's all about us – from God's point of view. For a long time, I've wanted to write a book, and I might still do someday, called “The Purpose Driven God,” and I would start the first lines with, “It's all about you!” And it is ... from God's perspective. It's not all about us making it all about

ourselves, but all about God making it all about us and wanting the very best for us and saying, “I’m not giving up until you are totally on board with me, understand how much I love you, and experience the joy, peace, and real freedom that only comes from knowing me!” Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians that “God fills all in all.” In other words, God completely fills everyone with himself. He leaves no one out, not abandoning anyone – not even the worst sinner! He is a Savior who saves and does not do just half a job of it. Paul is recorded by Luke in the book of Acts as saying to the philosophers on Mars Hill, “In God we live and move and have our being.” This is the kind of God we have. Everything is ultimately good in life because God is there with us, with all of us, and he’s going to get everybody where they need to be (with him in eternity) because that’s what Jesus came to accomplish. He’s not going to give up until his love wins!

Knowing that God is working in us – giving us the desire and power to do what pleases him – knowing this, removes our thinking that we must do something to win God’s approval. He already approves of us and loves us. He just wants our behavior, words, and thoughts to be good and right so we will fully experience him. And someday, when we do ... God will not love us any more than he does now in our season of growing and learning. Never forget that he is the one who is working in us; he is the one who is giving us the desire and power to do what pleases him. He’s the one making it happen, and he’s the one providing what we need to benefit ourselves, which pleases him.

God is not up there sitting with his arms folded, waiting for us to get our lives right and quit sinning so he can accept us. Just the opposite. He accepts us and loves us, rolls up his sleeves, and gets to work in our lives so we can do something, get our lives right, and quit sinning, which pleases him. God is working in us, and we get to watch his outworking and actively participate in it. It’s not autopilot. We don’t switch off, and then God makes us do everything. It’s not like that. We participate with him in

improving our lives. But ultimately, he is the one doing it. That's why he gave us about 75 years. It takes a long time. So now we can conclude, "If I'm going to get somewhere in life, and if I'm going to be improved, God, he's the one that will be doing it. I'm just going to comply with it so that I'll get there quicker, it'll be better sooner, and it won't be so painful." And when we get done, we won't conclude, "Man, oh man, I really made it happen, and thanks, God, for helping out a little bit." No, it will be more like, "God, you did it; you let me participate and be a part of that." So, it takes a big burden off us, and that's wonderful. This is what motivates me: to want other people to know how much God loves them and is working in their lives. To live in this is freedom – all else is going back under The Law and trying to *appease* God in some way, which we never can!

Do everything without complaining (2:14)

Now Paul brings some examples of how we can participate in what God is doing in us. *Do everything without complaining and arguing so that no one can criticize you.* Now, of course, people *can* criticize you even if you don't complain and argue. But to whatever degree you can avoid complaining and arguing, it will minimize any reason they have to criticize you. However, expect them to criticize you anyway! It's what people do. And it is often more about *them* than you! When we complain and argue and become annoying to people, it only contributes to the problems around us, we have no excuse, and those who criticize us are somewhat justified. It's correct criticism to some degree! So, Paul encourages his readers to stay out of that foolish realm of behavior, even though it is so easy to get pulled into it.

He continues, *Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of dishonesty*

and obstinance. Paul sounds like someone living in the Twenty-First Century, describing politicians. The truth is that they had plenty of such people in his day. My take is that most people are not corrupt. We all are, to some degree, but only a few are *totally* given over to selfish corruption. It only takes a few to make the news, kill people, rob banks, cause trouble, rape, murder, and do horrible things, which gives the appearance that evil is everywhere, all the time, in extreme measure. But it's not. Most people aren't totally corrupt. We all have our areas of sin and struggle, but a few people out there are extreme. And that's why they make the news ... because most people aren't doing those things. It's easy to watch the news and think, "The world's falling apart. Everybody's out there doing horrible stuff." No, it's just a few. And that's why they make the news. What we need to worry about is turning on the TV and hearing, "Breaking news: Man goes to work, does a good job, comes home, and loves his wife and kids!" That will only make the news when it is the exception, just as extreme corruption makes the news today. It's because it's the exception! So, as long as evil stays in the news, it means most people are not all that bad. But never forget that we are all sinners to some degree, and none of us can boast except in what God is doing in us.

Paul is saying, "To the degree that you can do everything without complaining and arguing so that no one can criticize you, live clean, innocent lives as children" (though not perfectly). This is what we should do. This is how we can choose to participate in what God is doing in our lives. We're never going to be perfectly innocent in this life. But we can be on the better end of the spectrum as God works in us and as we allow him to do so. We're thinking about him, we're engaging with him, we've got a life with him. We can live like this most of the time and maybe step over the line a little bit once in a while. That's about the best we can do in life, even with God working in us. He doesn't force us to be good; he just works in us to give us desires and strength. This

is why Paul added, “You will shine as bright lights in a world full of dishonesty and obstinance.” This is the world we live in.

There is a lot of foolishness going on out there. But again, I don't think it's the majority of people. I don't think it was the majority, even back in ancient times, though the world was a much harder place in which to live. They believed that “Might makes right,” and therefore brutality reigned supreme. But most people – the masses – were innocent victims (compared to the few monsters who oppressed them). Most people just went to work, did their jobs, lived under the tyranny of the government, and cared for their families and loved ones. But they did have thieves, like the ones they nailed to the crosses alongside Jesus. Most people were flawed, frail, and imperfect, just as we are today. There were some people, back then and today, who are as bad as they can possibly be. Somehow, they have an evil gene, a mental illness, or a chemical imbalance. But all of this is just the extreme sin that Jesus came to save us all from! Because we don't experience the same degree of sin in our lives, it does not make us any more valuable or loved by God. He came to save the worst sinner because he came to save everyone, and he will not fail. This is why of all humanity lives in hope for something so much better in eternity, even though many do not know about it or believe it. Those who struggle most with sin are out there, and this is why Paul wrote that we would shine like bright lights in the world. The Good News is that everyone will eventually shine this way when God finishes what he came to do in the person of Jesus.

Don't run life's race in vain (2:16)

Here is a little more encouragement from Paul on how we can participate in what God is doing in our lives. *Hold firmly to the word of life.* What does Paul mean by this? I often wish Paul had written a commentary on his letters so I could better understand what he was saying. But then, I suppose I would want

a commentary on his commentary! So where does it end? I am convinced that we will never obtain all the truth from reading books – even the New Testament, good and helpful as it is. The bottom line in life is that we can only find the ultimate truth in God himself. He is there and bids us to come to him and ask questions as needed. But then, we need to give God time to answer in his time and his way. It can come as a quiet voice in the privacy of our own thoughts, prayers, and meditations. It can come from experiences in life. It can come from friends and loved ones as we interact with them. It can come from good books we read, and yes, it can even come from the Bible ... but not exclusively from there. Through his Spirit, God can teach us anywhere, anytime, anyway, for any reason. He does not need an official religious leader, teacher, guru, or set of writings. He is unlimited in how he teaches us and works in our lives!

But still, we have questions like, “What does Paul mean by the *word of life*, and what does he mean by *hold firmly*?” Always start by taking words strung together by an author at face value. Let them mean what they seem to say, then go from there. Next, consider the immediate context. Words have very narrow and limited meanings when isolated. How words are used together gives each one meaning and, therefore, a particular message from the one writing them. However, some educated and reasonable guessing and speculation is always needed. Perhaps God built abstractness and ambiguity into human language so that we would be forced to ponder and think through all the many ideas that we are confronted with in life.

Perhaps Paul is saying, stick with what you have discovered as expressed to you (some *word*) about what life is all about. He might not mean exactly that, but I'm willing to bet he means something like that! What have you discovered about life? What do you know about life, what life is and isn't, and what *abundant life* is all about that you can only find in God? Paul wants us to hold firmly to this. Paul never seems to be big on anyone blindly

trusting him or any other human being – be it a guru, religious leader, or even a trusted friend. But it is always good to consider carefully what they have to say. Paul wrote this to the believers in Corinth, “Examine everything carefully, and hold firm to what is good.” I cannot think of any better advice. I have lived this way, and increasingly so, for the past fifty years, and it has led me to a better understanding of God, life, and what it all means.

Looking at the context of Paul’s other writings and the New Testament as a whole, Paul probably has Jesus in mind in his phrase *word of life*. As does John in his Gospel, Paul often refers to Jesus as *the Word*, the *Word of God*, or *preaching the Word*. He spells this out by claiming to “preach Jesus and him crucified.” In other words, he preaches *who* Jesus was and *what* he did – the *person* and *work* of Christ. So, when he tells his readers to “hold firmly to the word of life,” he most likely refers to Jesus and all he came to do on our behalf.

When Paul talked about the Word of God, he wasn't talking about the Bible or even the New Testament. Neither existed as an officially identified set of writings until late in the Fourth Century. All these writings existed, but there was no agreement on which writings might be authoritative. In fact, in those early days after Jesus and his apostles, only about twenty New Testament books were widely accepted. These were: the four Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, The 13 letters of Paul, Peter’s first letter, and John’s first letter. The others (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation) were all viewed more cautiously and not agreed upon by the majority of early Christians. It was not until 367 AD when Athanasius wrote a letter declaring the 27 books we now have in the New Testament to be official and authoritative. He even admitted in his letter that presenting a definitive list was an audacious act on his part. Even Martin Luther rejected and was suspicious of some of the New Testament books that had been collected, like Hebrews, James, and Revelation. However, he found Revelation to be a convenient

way to call the Pope an *Anti-Christ* and the *Beast* mentioned in that book!

The New Testament didn't exist in its collected form, all bound up in one volume, taken it to church with a black cover and gold edges. Well, that's what it looked like when I was a kid, and I always wondered why they made the Bible with a black cover. Isn't black supposed to represent sin? I was told that *green* was for growth, *red* was the blood of Jesus, *white* represented our purity in Christ, and *gold* was the color of the streets in heaven. I think they just gave it a serious-looking cover so that people would respect it. However, modern translations and colorful thematic covers seem much more realistic today!

So, Paul suggests that we “hold firmly to the word of life,” which would be Jesus, who is the ultimate word *about* life that we are wise to hang on to. Paul goes on and writes what the outcome will be if his readers do what he asked: *Then on the day of Christ's return, I will be proud that I did not run life's race in vain and that my life's work was not useless.* Paul wrote often about the Second Coming of Jesus. Clearly, he expected this to happen within the lifetime of his readers. He never indicates that it will occur sometime in the distant future – certainly not 2000 years later! The book of Revelation (which came at the end of the First Century and was not uniformly accepted by early Christians) also clearly presents Jesus' return as soon – soon enough so that the original readers were to pay attention to all these written warnings. Jesus was even more emphatic and precise that his return would be soon. In Matthew's Gospel, he is recorded as saying in his long list of future predictions that “this generation will not pass away until all these things come to pass.” And, that word *generation* always refers to one turnover of people who brought children into this life. The length of time was often identified as forty years, but not exclusively.

There seems to be some flexibility in the scope of “one generation.” However, Jesus could not have been clearer when Matthew recorded him as saying, on another occasion, “There are some standing here who will not experience death before I come in glory with my angels.” No wiggle room there! This is troubling for most Christians, and the mental gymnastics that are proposed by some to avoid the obvious are amazing. Jesus was either mistaken about the time of his return, or what was recorded was not what he actually claimed, or he was speaking figuratively, or he had some other meaning in mind that no one could possibly understand. Either way, it is a problem, and the Bible is full of such problems. Yet, many people persistently claim the Bible to be “the very word of God,” that “when it speaks, God is speaking,” and that it is completely void of any errors whatsoever. Somehow, this could be because God can do anything, and our perception is flawed and biased. However, taken at face value, trying to be as objective as possible, the Second Coming of Jesus (as expected by Jesus and the early church) just did not happen – unless some kind of spiritual (or figurative) Second Coming happened. Like so many other questions, we are wise to go directly to God for final answers, knowing that he is the ultimate source of truth.

When Paul wrote, “I don't want to run the race of life in vain,” he knew that it would not be a waste of time if no one came to Christ because of him. But this is how he felt, and Paul was pretty honest about his emotions in all his letters. He knew it was up to God to bring people to Jesus. But Paul was human, and I think we can all understand his sentiment. When we share the message of God's grace with people, love and help others, and raise our kids to know God, we hope for the best in them, and we hope our efforts produce something in them that will last. We all want to do what's right and have it effective in other people's lives and our own.

11. Christ's Death (Philippians 2:17-24)

Rejoicing, even in death (2:17)

Paul now brings a more personal, reflective tone. *But I will rejoice, even if I lose my life.* Paul talked about this earlier in this letter. He was equally good with living or dying. That's a great way to live. It reduces stress. He knew that dying meant being with Christ, yet living meant helping more people learn about God's wonderful grace for all humanity. He couldn't lose either way!

Paul adds that even if he does lose his life, there is good in it. *It will be like an offering to God, just as your faithful service is also.* This is an interesting word-picture that he uses. He is alluding to the sacrificial system in the Old Testament. Most people have a lot of mixed feelings about this because there seems to be something terribly wrong about it. We instinctively know it is wrong to do violence even against animals, cutting their throats, letting the blood spill into a basin, and then taking tree branches and splattering that blood over people standing in a crowd in front of the altar! What kind of nonsense is this? Is this kind of activity from God, or is it something humans invented as a distorted view of God, trying their best to appease him? My take is that God knew that people instinctively felt like they needed to *appease the gods*, even though God himself never required it. Why

would he? God loves his world, wants the very best for everyone, and is always at work in people's lives to bring this about.

But many Christians today have this mindset – that they must *appease God* in some way, or he'll get angry and do something horrible to them – in this life or the one to come. They live under fear, guilt, and peer pressure. It gets further heightened by well-meaning people who have had this kind of thinking drilled into their minds and hearts all their lives and then pass the fear, guilt, and religious bondage on to their children and other people who are insecure and struggling in life. They are easy targets for this kind of control over them. Paul makes it clear in his letter to the Galatians that believers in Jesus are free from all such law, guilt, and fear and need never go back under The Law to live in religious bondage. This was the main theme and warning of his letter. (See my commentary on Galatians titled, "Never Going Back!" for a detailed presentation of Paul's freeing message of the Good News about Jesus.)

People tend to pass on to others what was passed on to them, both good and bad. It is the way *indoctrination* works (as opposed to *education*). Guilt, fear, and peer pressure are effective ways to control people and keep them there. It's kind of an attitude of, "You better bring it, appease God, do what we say, and believe what we say is true, or you're going to be in trouble, Mister!" This is so far from telling people about the wonderful love of God, which should be our real (and only) motive for doing what is right in life, living for God because we love him – not because we're under some law that requires us to do so, hanging some kind of doom over our head to keep us in line! We can now do what's right because we love God, and things will go well in our lives; we will have peace, joy, and freedom. He wants all of this for us – for the right reasons, not the wrong ones.

I think Paul's alluding to Old Testament sacrifices because many of his readers are used to thinking in such terms. He is using known things to explain new, different, and unknown things –

God's grace, the work of Jesus on the cross, and how this all works in their lives. Even Jesus was described as a "sacrifice". However, I don't believe for a minute that he was an object of God's violence or that God has an attitude of, "If I see sin down there among humanity, somebody's gotta pay for it – someone's got to be punished!" I was taught all my life that where there is sin, somebody's got to go through pain and agony, even if it's an innocent person, because sin robs God of his honor and dignity, and he needs to get it back by punishing somebody for it. This idea is known as *penal substitution*, and it comes from the Middle Ages, particularly from Anselm, who first proposed it.

I see the atonement of Christ much differently. God was basically saying, "You guys need a sacrifice to *appease the gods*? I'll send you my own Son, my only begotten, generated by me from out of my very being. You can (and will) sacrifice him; I will let you, but in order to prove my unconditional love for you, I will not retaliate in violence against you!" We sacrificed Jesus! We killed him. That is, as humanity, we killed him while instinctively trying to *appease the gods*. It is like Isaac taking his son up the mountain to sacrifice him, but God stopped him. It was a real-life object lesson. It was the best way for God to demonstrate to Abraham that he does not solve his problems with violence.

The lesson from all this is that Jesus came into this world as the only begotten Son of God, willingly laying down his life at the violent hands of humanity that he so loves. But he doesn't strike back or solve our sin problem using violence. He allows it in us, and says, "Go ahead, kill me. You know what? I'm going to prove to you that I love you and that I don't solve my problems with violence. I won't rise up and retaliate against you in this life or in the one to come. I will prove to you that I love you by *not* reacting in the same way that you have acted in your tendency to be violent and take things into your own hands. I have come to save you from sin and from your own selves. I have not come to condemn you!"

So, Paul says he rejoices, even if he loses his life because doing so is like an offering to God in accordance with the sacrifice Jesus made for the world that he so loved and came to save. He tells his readers that their faithful service is also an offering to God. His dying sacrifice (if that happens) is for the purpose of getting the Good News out for all to hear, and their living sacrifice – their faithful service is also an offering to God. Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a *living* sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your true and proper worship.”

Now, here's the key to all of this. Look at the next verse. *And I want all of you to share this joy.* Paul wants them to share the joy of giving their lives to Christ in meaningful service every day and understand that this is a real, honorable, and nonviolent sacrifice – a living sacrifice. There is nothing but joy in this and it is something all of us can experience if we see God for who he is in all his grace, love, kindness, and wanting only the best for all his creation. “I’m happy to die,” says Paul. “I’ll give my life up any time, or I can stick around and serve God by serving all of you! But I want you to all share this joy.” One last thought by Paul as he finishes this important topic. *Yes, you should rejoice, and I will share in your joy.* This summarizes all he has written about sacrificing and the joy found in real sacrifice, which is a *living* sacrifice.

The meaning and purpose of Christ’s death

So that's a lot to digest in these previous four verses (14-17). He starts with, “Do everything without complaining and arguing and live innocent lives.” But then he encourages them to rejoice because of the excellent sacrifice they made before God (as did Paul), which is in line with the kind of sacrifice Jesus made on

behalf of humanity. It was the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, and it even goes further than that. It's a sacrifice that says, "None of this was necessary" – ever – Old Testament or New. But as fallen, failed, insecure, guilt-ridden, fearful human beings, we mistakenly assume that we must do something to earn favor with God. But we don't, and Christ's atonement is a great big, "No, you don't need to do anything, never have needed to, because God's going to bring you into a wonderful, right, enjoyable, satisfying, and secure relationship with himself as the one who made you and loves you!"

The Law, the sacrificial system, and the atonement of Christ – all it did was to show us that we're sinners, falling short of perfection and that we need Jesus to save us from ourselves and our sins. We all need God in our lives. God was saying, essentially, "I will sacrifice myself, in the person of my only Son who was begotten of me, to put an end to this *appeasing the gods* nonsense, and to prove to you that none of this is in my heart in any way whatsoever." It's not the way God operates. He doesn't solve his problems with violence. But we do! Look at the history of the world and all the trouble in the world today.

Unfortunately, some in the history of the church turned the atonement of Christ into an ugly thing where God looks upon sin, gets all mad and angry about it, and then has to respond in some horrible way. For them, God builds up his anger until he must do something violent in response to sin. And then they see the atonement of Christ as God saying, "I know what I'll do. I'll mistreat my son, even though he's completely innocent, instead of mistreating all these sinners who deserve punishment (not correction!)" Their theory is that this mistreatment of Jesus instead of us – all the violence and wrath he pours out on his Son will somehow satisfy all of this built-up resentment in God. But this is such a fallen-human way of seeing God. How petty it makes him out to be. But many, many Christians are taught this violent view of Christ's death. They fail to see that it was the

Father and Son, along with the Holy Spirit, acting together in all that Jesus did on the cross to save the world. No one needed to be mistreated to appease God in some way. He has no such need. Instead, it was all three of them saying, in accord, “We’re going to solve this problem of sin. We’re going to come, and we’re going to be the solution together, in this human person of Jesus. And we’re not going to kill or inflict pain on each other or act in any kind of violence. We have come to save by giving of ourselves, which is what love must always do!”

Jesus, in his voluntary death, was effectively saying, “I’m going to give my life and die *with* you, *for* you, and even *as* you,” because he became the new head of the human race (replacing Adam). “When I die, you all die with me, and I die with you. And then, guess what ... I will rise from the dead, by the power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together, bring victory over death, and bring eternal life to all humanity!” This is so much different than looking at the atonement as an angry God looking for somebody beat up for all the sin going on out there in the world, but then deciding to pour his wrath out on his own innocent son – one who never sinned – punishing him instead of the majority of humanity who didn’t make the cut in the grand scheme of things. And somehow, this act of punishment, void of any corrective purpose whatsoever, is supposed to satisfy an angry, vindictive god? Instead, I see God as one who looks down and sees multitudes of religious people trying hard to appease him by bowing down on bent knees to prove their sincerity. But he is telling them all, “Get off your knees and come give me a big hug. Sit on my lap and let me put my loving arms around you and let you know you are safe and secure in me and in all that I am. Let me look into your eyes so that you can see my loving face, full of sincerity and compassion, only wanting the very best for you, which includes helping you grow and learn how to live free from the horror and agony of your sin, which tends to dominate your life.’

But what is insane about this idea of God punishing his innocent Son (instead of us) to solve the sin problem for humanity is that it didn't really work! Most Christians believe that even after Jesus died for everyone, there is still something each person must do in order to cause the atonement to take effect in their life. And that one thing is that they must *believe*, or they are still toast. That, for them, is the *one* requirement that God still places on individuals for them to be saved from never-ending torment. But this simply turns faith into a *work* – something we do to earn favor with God. It is, effectively, still living under The Law – the law of having to do something (belief) to earn favor with God. But grace is “unearned favor” from God, and as soon as we set anything up as a requirement to prevent God from tormenting us forever for our sins, it becomes a *work*.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, makes it crystal clear that “We are saved *by* grace, *through* faith, and not of ourselves, because salvation is a free gift from God. It's not a result of any kind of *works*, so that we can have nothing to brag about.” I often ask people, “Just before Jesus died on the cross, how many people were saved?” They will usually say *none* because they know Jesus died to save sinners, and without him, no one can be saved. But then I ask them, “Right after Jesus died on the cross, how many people were saved?” They usually have to think about it. But most will eventually conclude that belief is required, and therefore, none are actually saved right after Jesus died. What kind of flimsy, man-dependent, unsuccessful salvation is that?

God pouring Out Wrath?

I remember when I was first beginning to understand the full implications of Salvation by Grace, looking for the verse in the Bible that says, “God poured his wrath out on his Son.” I was so sure it was in the Bible somewhere because I had heard this so many times while growing up in a Baptist church. I remember my

pastor saying this in his sermons on many occasions. I remember thinking, “I gotta find that verse.” I looked and looked and even used a concordance (a list of all words in the New Testament, alphabetically). But such a verse was nowhere to be found. I was shocked. I was so sure, and I had such a clear picture of an angry God, inflicting horrible pain on Jesus when he died on the cross. I was even told that the torment God brought on Jesus (instead of us) was infinitely worse than whatever temporary pain he experienced physically. It was (in their words) an eternity of punishment for all the sins of the whole world experienced in just a few hours of time on the cross.

Wow, that’s pretty dramatic. It had a huge impact on me, but it gave me a disgusting, sick, fearful view of God – a kind of yin-yang view where God was the most wonderful, loving person, and yet he was also the meanest, cruelest, most vengeful, retaliating being that ever existed. Additionally, I remember wondering, “If Jesus took in our place, an eternity’s worth of pain and suffering from God then why and how could anyone ever be punished and retaliated against for their sin ... unless Jesus didn’t actually accomplish what he did.” Well, sure enough, when I asked this question as a young man, the answer was, “Because you gotta believe! Jesus only died to make people *saveable*. He didn’t actually and completely save anyone!”

It is easy to see how people can be attracted to this view of the violent, substitutionary view of Christ’s death. It presents Jesus as very loving and willing to take on something horrible coming our way (the wrath of God) and shielding us from it. However, as pointed out above, it did not appear to be a very effective or complete endeavor. But still, someone taking on himself something horrible to spare others is, indeed, a loving, selfless act. But I think the error is simple. Jesus wasn’t taking a *bullet* from the Father ... he was taking the bullet shot at us by sin! He wasn’t taking any kind of punishment from the Father in the form of wrath. Remember that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

were working together to save people from their sin – from themselves – from the effects of our failures and shortcomings that are so destructive in our lives.

One reason this perspective remains appealing to many Christians today is because they have been *indoctrinated* into believing it. The way indoctrination works (as opposed to education) is that people are told a carefully crafted narrative, over and over, that does not include all available facts. Plus, they are told, “Never look into anything else, and never trust anyone else because we alone have the truth.” When this happens, people really have no choice but to believe what they are taught and not question it. It becomes true because it is so familiar to them. Education, on the other hand, at least tries to give people all the facts and as much diverse information as possible so they can think it all through and make their own decisions. God’s wrath against sinners is not what Jesus took on when he died. He took the punishment of sin, the thing that destroys us. What he took on himself was the *sin* of the world, not the wrath of God.

So, this explains why the violent view of Christ’s atonement (commonly known as *Penal Substitutionary Atonement*) is so popular today in modern Christian circles and institutions. It is a very emotional thing for many of them, especially leaders. Without it, there is very little “drama and trauma” that so often acts as a catalyst for controlling people and keeping them engaged in religion. People can be *convinced* into an emotional state of thinking, “Wow, Jesus loved me so much that he died for me and took the penalty and punishment that was due to me from an angry God. He took my place in that horrible situation. Oh, I so love him for it. Thank you, Jesus!” Well, yes, that’s a very selfless, loving thing for Jesus (or anyone) to do. So, in that way, they are seeing the self-sacrificing nature of God’s love in action. In other words, the *emotion* of this view is good, but the *facts* of it are wrong. I don’t think getting beat up by the Father is what Jesus did at all because it turns God into a retaliating God who, when we sin,

invokes in him a desire to do something horrible to people. I think it's just the opposite. When we sin, what it invokes in God is his wanting to *save* people, to rescue them, and nothing else but this. God always wants to redeem people, make them whole, and say, "I have already forgiven you. Come to me, and I'll give you rest. And if you don't, I'm never gonna give up on you." That's a whole different message than an angry God who, when we sin, builds up anger in himself until he's got to come back to earth and gather everybody who fails to believe and send them to hell forever. It's a very, very different picture of salvation, and it is not salvation by grace!

I'm just giving you my take on all of this, and I'm trying to be as accurate as I can be and true to Paul's writings, keeping them from saying things they don't say and genuinely trying to ensure that they are allowed to say everything Paul intended. I have no doubt that I have failed to some degree, but it is up to you, as the reader, to take this all to God and ultimately sort it out with him. Unlike me, he will never fail you!

I'll send you Timothy in my place (2:19)

Now, in verse 19, Paul shifts gears a little bit. *If God is willing, I hope to send Timothy to visit you very soon. Then, he can cheer me up by telling me how well you are doing.* Paul is a very heartfelt human for a mean, nasty guy who used to drag Christians out into the street and kill them. Something happened to him over the fourteen-year period when he was with Christ, or thought things through, or whatever happened to him. We do not have much detail about this. But Paul somehow became a kind, loving, amazingly transformed person. He now cares deeply about people. He cares how they feel. And he cares about his co-worker in ministry, Timothy.

Paul concludes that if Timothy visits these folks in Philippi, whatever report he brings back to Paul will bring him joy in hearing how well they are getting along. He seemed to assume this, so I think he knew them to be a spiritually well-off bunch of people – unlike those in Corinth, to which he also sent a letter. Paul wants to send Timothy to these people and get a report back. Hey, they didn't have the Internet or any real mail delivery system in those days. Word was spread and carried from place to place by traveling individuals. It took a while to get any information from remote places.

I have no one else like Timothy who genuinely cares about your welfare. Timothy is special. Not everyone cares about others. But Paul goes on and adds, *All the others care only for themselves and not for what matters to Jesus Christ.* Well, not really *all* the others. Probably, Paul means *many* others. We all use hyperbole in our speech, and Paul is no exception. Even Jesus used it a few times to dramatize his point. He said, on one occasion, “If anyone does not hate their father and mother, they cannot be my disciple!” Any thinking person, especially if they are familiar with other things Jesus taught, will not be able to conclude that Jesus literally wants people to hate their parents. Instead, he was trying to emphasize the importance of following him at nearly all costs. In effect, Jesus was saying, “Loving your own parents (important as that is) is nothing compared to the importance of following me.”

So, Paul is doing the same kind of thing. Compared to everyone else, Timothy was way out front in loving and caring about other people. Look around you today. Although rare, there are a few people like Timothy who go way beyond the call of duty to love and care about others. Not everyone is called to do this in an extreme way. But some are. Perhaps you are! Only a quiet chat with God can ever reveal such a calling to you!

Timothy cared about the welfare of others. He was the kind of servant who didn't care about gathering a crowd to think highly of him. He wasn't like some who desired everyone to buy his book or wanted people to see him as a great teacher. There's nothing wrong with that stuff, but that's not who he was. He cared about the well-being of others. That can cover a wide spectrum of life. It is the heart of a true shepherd who pays attention to people's needs. That was genuinely in his heart when he visited these people, and Paul knew all the ill motives of people in ministry, in politics, and everywhere else.

This aligns with what Paul wrote earlier in this letter, "Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too." Focusing on self-interests is what most people do ... certainly politicians. This is always a real problem within a democracy. It's hard to get a good person who honestly puts others first to run for office. This is because good people don't want to go through all the nonsense required to win. However, self-centered egotists find plenty of selfish reasons to make it worthwhile. They love all the glory, the honor, the game playing, and the other politics that accompany being in control. But occasionally, a truly good person gets involved in political leadership. They are good-hearted people like Timothy, but they also have the temperament that allows them to put up with, ignore, and cut through all the nonsense that comes with the job. Look for such people and vote for them. Cast your vote based on character, not just on what you might gain, materially, if they get elected. Such people are rare and hard to find, and Paul knew this was true of people, even those in the ministry of others.

And so, he's saying, "Timothy genuinely cares about your welfare; the others they care for themselves." Look at Jesus's life. It was all about people and their well-being. It wasn't about creeds, official doctrinal statements, having a big church ... or having a church at all! There are so many things we have in churches today that came out of the Fourth Century, and most

people don't even realize it. When Constantine took over all the pagan temples, he gave them to the Christians, who he enlisted to help him make Christianity the State Religion. What a mistake. Christians inherited the idea of meeting in big buildings, they got used to preachers getting up in front of a crowd while they all sat there passively. They took on a lot of pagan practices and ideas, including some of their festivals and religious days, and *Christianized* them. Somebody once said, "Rome was conquered by Christians, but Christianity was also conquered by Rome!"

Christianity during the Fourth Century emerged much different in size (2 million to 20 million) and in focus (from tolerance to control). In many ways it became "yet another religion" over about an eighty-year period of time. It went from a simple and humble faith to a powerhouse that combined church and state in the worst possible ways. A history full of corrections (like the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment) is proof of this, and we are still sorting it all out today! Most Christians live with a heritage of the Roman Catholic Church from the Middle Ages, do not realize it, and assume that all they believe is a correct representation of the early church. But it is not. Check this out!

After telling them that Timothy is an example of someone who cares about people, whereas so many others do not care about what matters to Jesus (focus on people's needs), he turns his attention back to his readers and reminds them of what they already know about Timothy: *But you know how Timothy proved himself to be like a son to me as if I were his father. He has served with me in preaching the Good News.* Paul and Timothy worked together a lot; I'm sure it was a mentor/disciple type of relationship. But it seemed more personal and affectionate than just a mentoring arrangement.

I hope to send him to you just as soon as I find out what's going to happen to me here. Oh, good luck, Paul. It may take a while before you send Timothy anywhere. As he made clear at the beginning of this letter, Paul is writing from within prison. Anything could happen there. He could even have his life ended by those who incarcerate him. But anyway, he will wait and see what happens to him before he sends Timothy. *I have confidence from the Lord that I myself will come to you soon.* He is clearly hoping he will be released soon and will be able to accompany Timothy to visit the Philippians.

12. Special People (Philippians 2:25-30)

Brother, co-worker, fellow soldier (2:25)

Meanwhile, I thought I should send Epaphroditus back to you. So, here's another guy, probably a lot like Timothy. He is a true brother, coworker, and fellow soldier. Perhaps this represents three aspects of life: family (brother), society (coworker), and soldier (warfare – the fight for survival, spiritually and physically). When I was a kid in the 50's, WWII had recently ended, but war, defeating a threat, and survival were fresh on the minds of my parents and others. How could it not be? We all live in the age into which we are born, and our lives are shaped by it. I remember many songs sung at church that had warfare as a theme, like *Onward Christian Soldiers*. Sunday School teachers would have us march in place as we sang it. It was fun.

But we are fighting a spiritual battle, of sorts, so this theme is always relevant in any age. Perhaps you recall the *Amour of God*, presented by Paul at the end of his letter to the Ephesians. Hopefully, we will never forget that love is the greatest weapon in our spiritual war chest. Love to many seems so passive and gentle. And this is true, but it is also very strong – just strong in a passive and gentle manner. It is, by far, the most powerful force in the universe – it always has been and always will be. It is what motivated God to act in the very best way to save humanity. Jesus did not come with a sword for a quick take-over to solve the sin

problem. He came to die *for* us, *with* us, and even *as* us, so that we would all live forever with him. This takes time. They say that the wheels of justice turn slowly, and that is true. But the wheels of love turn even slower, but all the surer and more final. "Love never fails," wrote Paul to the Corinthians.

Love is our greatest weapon; it is very powerful. People will strike you down physically, verbally, and in all kinds of ways. But when you genuinely love someone, even when they don't love you in return, it's extremely powerful and effective. Gandhi and Martin Luther King are just two shining examples of the kind of love Jesus lived and taught. It doesn't always bring people to their knees, but eventually it will because love is not a concept, it is a *person* who takes action ... God, in the person of Jesus, his only Son, *begotten* out of his very own being. When you love certain people, you may never see the result of it. It may be way down the road of life after you're gone, and they say, "Wow, I remember that person who loved me, the way they treated me, and the way they responded to me so genuinely. I didn't realize it or understand it at the time, but that person kept on loving me while I gave nothing in return. And it was the inequity that eventually got to me and helped me see my own lack of love. I'm so thankful now, and I wish I could thank that person today."

Paul goes on and says more about Epaphroditus and why he *sent him back* to these folks in Philippi. *He was your messenger that you sent to help me in my time of need.* People traveled back and forth, carried greetings, related some message about what was happening elsewhere, and were even sent to help others. Epaphroditus was this kind of messenger. *And I'm sending him back to you because he has been longing to see you and was very distressed that you heard he was ill.* Apparently, Epaphroditus had a very personal relationship with these people, close enough for them to feel concerned about an illness he had.

Epaphroditus was sick and he was hurting, so they were worried about him. People who love each other respond this way, are rightly concerned about others, and they even get distressed because others are worried about them. Some people think that acting this way implies a lack of trust in God. This could be true in some circumstances, but not always. In fact, being concerned about others – even though we know God is in control and has an ultimately good purpose in it – being genuinely concerned is normal, very human, and is not necessarily a lack of faith.

I've been on both ends of this kind of challenge. I've been the sick one where others are rightly concerned about me (just as I was concerned about myself), and I've been in situations where a loved one was experiencing a prolonged, chronic illness. I'm not sure which kind of concern (for self or others) is worse. I'm not sure which kind of struggle is worse – going through something difficult or watching helplessly as a loved one suffers. Perhaps they are each hard, just in different ways. Going through your own limiting illness is discouraging and distracting because the illness is all you can think about. You just want it to end, even though you may know that God has some ultimately good purpose in it. And watching someone else go through a prolonged illness is devastating. You would gladly share the burden and pain, but life does not work that way; I like Paul's exhortation at the end of his letter to the Galatians: "Bear one another's burdens, yet each person must bear their own burdens." Both are true, and the careful line dividing these two experiences is key. Trying to take on (emotionally or physically) someone else's burdens is like trying to be God in some way, not allowing him to do the work that only he can do. Yet, unwillingness to share others' burdens in the ways that we can is certainly a lack of love and downright selfishness.

Sorrows on top of sorrows (2:27)

Paul further explains, He certainly was ill. In fact, he almost died. But God had mercy on him and on me, preventing me from experiencing one sorrow on top of another. Paul was a man of sorrows. He had more difficult stuff going on in his life than most people did back then. He lived pretty well before becoming a believer in Jesus. He was a high-ranking Pharisee with all the perks. Then, on his way to persecute and kill yet more Christians, Jesus stopped him on the road in a bright, blinding light, along with a voice asking him why he was persecuting *him*. Yes, Jesus took it personally. That's how Paul described it, anyway. He claimed to have heard a voice, but others with him just heard a noise. But no matter what, who, or why, Paul became a changed man, and this is when his trouble began.

I know many people feel like life became harder after they became Christians. Some believe it is pushback from their old friends, some think it is the Devil after them, and some even think it's some kind of cleansing karma that was due to them. But almost everyone I know agrees that they are better off, even with all the added difficulty. Paul seemed to feel the same way. In the upcoming Philippians Three, Paul will spell this out in detail, saying, "Everything else in life is worthless compared to the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

But Paul continued on in his new life, spending about fourteen years, -- probably the best years of his life -- offline, on the shelf, learning directly from Jesus. He was no longer an extreme Jew chasing down the Christians, but he also wasn't yet the one being persecuted and chased down by his previously associated fellow Pharisees. Something happened to Paul during this interim period in his life. It took time, but he became a new man in Christ and learned how to walk with him daily. Although Paul knew he could now weather just about anything that came

along and knew God always did what was right, still he felt relieved that yet another sorrow, like losing Epaphroditus to a severe illness, had passed and was not something he was asked to endure. It's okay for us to ask God if we can avoid some difficulty and be relieved if God allows it to pass without incident. Even Jesus asked the Father to allow him to avoid the horrors of the cross that he knew was coming. Yet, his bottom line was that his Father's will must be done rather than what he preferred. Sorrows, difficulties, problems, and challenges are never fun – they're just not. None of us want to go through them, even though we know that this is how we learn and grow. In fact, it is the only way! But notice Paul doesn't say, "Oh boy, another sorrow for me to go through. I get to learn more about life and grow closer to God." Paul didn't (and we don't either) want yet one more sorrow upon another. It wears on us. So, Paul is just as human as we are. That is good to know.

Paul wraps up his lengthy tribute to Epaphroditus by writing, *So I am all the more anxious to send him back to you; I know you'll be glad to see him. As a result, I will be much less worried about you.* Paul wants to send Epaphroditus back to them so he can deliver Paul's message – perhaps as Paul's representative, knowing he is in good hands with those in Philippi who love each other. This took a big burden off Paul. *Welcome him with Christian love and with great joy and give him the honor that people like him deserve.* Such people as Epaphroditus deserve honor, not because they're so great, not because they draw a big crowd, not because they have a tape ministry and everybody thinks they're awesome, but simply because they care! Like Timothy, he is one who watches out for their well-being and their welfare. And that's what, obviously, Epaphroditus was doing. *He risked his life for me and for the work of Christ; he was at the point of death while doing for*

me what you couldn't do from so far away. In a way, Epaphroditus was representing these other folks when he visited Paul in jail, doing things for him that these people would have done if they could but were not in the same location.

Catch a glimpse, if you can, of this whole swirling picture of supporting each other, loving each other, sending people in your place, appreciating them, and expressing concern about what others are going through. Maybe this is why God allows all this kind of stuff to happen. I have often thought, "God, why do you allow all this suffering, sickness, and illness? It's horrible to go through, seems to have no purpose, and takes so long to endure through it." Maybe God allows it because it can (and hopefully does) make us tender-hearted and concerned, gives us an opportunity to love each other in the most difficult of circumstances, and somehow it brings about something better than what we would have received had everything gone well and we never had any problems. We would just go to Disneyland, have fun, and enjoy life.

Don't get me wrong, there is a time to have good, enjoyable experiences. We need these in our lives! It is healthy. But there are also a lot of challenges in life. Many of them cannot be avoided. We don't get to pick which difficulties we prefer (except, maybe, the ones we bring on ourselves). We don't get to decide how quickly we work through problems or what options we have in solving them. Sometimes all we can do is *endure*! That's a word Paul uses a lot in his letters. Paul knew that people would either endure in Christ or endure alone without him, complaining, living in depression, and being discouraged. But either way, we must endure. No matter what, we've all gotta go through problems. And so, at some point, we are wise to conclude, "Ya know, there's something good that's going to come out of this, even if I don't ever find out what it is in this life! But usually, we do find out – just later in life. Have you ever been through difficult things where you look back and say, "Ah ha, that's what God was doing.

I didn't have a clue at the time. I'm thankful that God did what he did. However, I wish I didn't have to go through it. Yet, I thank God for bringing something ultimately good into my life that I never would have been wise enough to see or sign up for!"

Keeping it real

You will seldom hear this kind of optimism about life that can only come from a very big and loving God, who is unlimited in power and goodness. This commentary, for example, presents a very high and successful view of God. I try to keep it as broad as possible and give all the facts, not just a few carefully selected ones. The Trinity is an example of this. I realize that God may very well, somehow and in some way, exist as three separate persons, all equal in divinity, and yet be one God and not three. Who am I to say this is not true? I am nobody in this manner. But I can and have the right to – maybe even have the duty to – ask good questions, present all the facts, and offer my opinion for consideration. I think everyone has this right, but it should always be done respectfully and in love.

To me, it is reasonable to ask if the Trinitarian view of God is true or false. Asking such a question is not the same as dogmatically stating that it is untrue! I try to stay away from that. But I do desire people to have all the facts, even the ones I don't like. Doing this gets a person's search for truth out of my hands, away from lowly *indoctrination*, and provides a fair shot for each person to figure things out for themselves. When this happens, I am satisfied. I could never be satisfied having people blindly trust me. Though I pursued being a pastor most of my life (from about 25 to 65), I never fully pulled the trigger to become one. I graduated from seminary, and it was one of the most interesting and helpful years of my life. But it was cut short by events outside my control. It was, at the time, a very difficult dream to let go of at age 32. But now I look back and thank God for what he

prevented, circumstantially. What I wanted so badly at the time turned out to be something that would not have been best for me and my young family. For others, becoming a pastor, just as they desired and planned, was a good thing – perhaps the best thing for them!

But back to the problems with the Trinity view of God, as I investigated this over many years of study, it became clear that this was not any kind of slam-dunk or no-brainer (as I was always taught). The problems are many and very real, but they are never revealed to most church-going people who blindly trust those who lead them. The doctrine of the Trinity, it turns out, was clearly an invention of the Fourth Century. It came about as a result of church leaders in that day fighting each other vehemently for power, both religiously and politically. This came about, sadly, because Constantine, in his attempt to elevate Christianity and have it become the official religion of the Roman Empire, mixed church and state, which turned out to be one of the greatest disasters in history. We are still fighting that battle today because it so threatens our freedom as individuals. The Fourth Century started out with extreme tolerance (mandated by Constantine in his Edict of Milan) and ended up in extreme intolerance, forcing doctrines like the Trinity on everyone, requiring them to comply. This mixing of church dogma with state power launched the monstrous Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages.

Here are just a few features of the doctrine of the Trinity that are nowhere found in the writings of the New Testament. (1) distinguishing between Jesus being of the *same* substance, and not just a *similar* substance, of the Father. (2) Declaring Jesus to be the *eternally* begotten son of God, as opposed to being the *only* begotten Son of God. (3) The idea of *God the Son* and *God the Holy Spirit*, as opposed to *Son of God* and *Spirit of God*. I could not help but to ask myself, why did they need to make up new terms that are never used in the New Testament? Are their arguments against those who opposed them in the Fourth Century so weak

that they must resort to that? Is the New Testament insufficient, on its own, to present an accurate view of God? These questions do not disprove the doctrine of the Trinity, but they sure are good questions, and people should have all the facts and be able to ask such good questions to discover the truth, no matter what it is. Still, most Christians will argue that God exists in a trinitarian form, as an *absolute* doctrine, not to be questioned. And perhaps they are right. But it requires *a whole lot of assuming* to conclude that the guys in the Fourth Century got it right, over 300 years after Jesus and the apostles lived and seemed to not have any such understanding about God!

All churches tend to sanitize what they believe. They can't help it; it's who they are. It is the nature of the church itself, which is a collection of like-minded people (nothing wrong with that) who want to hear and have reinforced whatever they all assume to be true (nothing wrong with that, either). But it never leaves much room for any real objectivity, mutual respect, and equal time for those who oppose. Nor does it leave room for a fair-minded, inquisitive study of any topic. It is just human nature to assume and be protective. It's hard to avoid or prevent. However, people have the right to either look into or, collectively, censor anything they want. Censorship may very well prevent them from discovering the truth, but they are free to make that choice and avoid the painful journey of "examining everything carefully," as Paul exhorted. They are free to live an easier life of never looking into things, never being quite sure, and trusting others to decide what they should believe. However, in their defense, once they have a strong conviction, most people become certain that they have the truth and feel they need not look elsewhere or seek validation in any way. Perhaps they are right!

The church's job is to only teach what supports their *carefully crafted narrative* and repeat this to their congregation week after week. This is, essentially, indoctrination. Hey, if you know you have the truth, why expose people to what you know is in error

only to confuse and discourage them? Right? It is problematic to make such assumptions. How can people think for themselves and sort things out if they have only *some* of the available facts? But right or wrong, this seems to be the job of most churches ... to define the truth and protect people from *heresy* and *false teaching* (which is always defined as whatever they don't believe!).

I'm not saying it's all bad. I grew up under a certain narrative, and it was very protective for me as a kid and as a young adult. I stayed out of trouble; I lived a pure, clean life, which turned out to be very good for me, my marriage, my family, my relationships, and my overall well-being. I have little complaint about my legalistic Baptist upbringing because it has served me well. But at what cost? I also wasn't told everything. And so, there was a type of *protection* in it for me, but there was also a lot of limitation, fear, insecurity, and some religious bondage. God wants better than that for everyone.

After about fifty years of seeking the truth at all costs and following the facts wherever they lead, I understand things better now. I found this to be the only path to real freedom, joy, and "peace that passes understanding." I'm much freer than I ever was when I was bound by the laws within a church. But the bottom line is that I am thankful for everything God has brought (allowed?) into my life. It all had a great and grand purpose, custom-tailored just for me. Some things have been really hard, and some things I brought upon myself, yet other things were thrust upon me. However, some things – perhaps most things – have been good, positive, and enjoyable. However, I have learned that just a little bit of negativity can easily paint and spoil the greater good that we experience. Keep an eye out for this in your own life and don't get tricked out of enjoying the good life God has given you! *Perspective* is sometimes everything.

13. Worthless in Comparison (Philippians 3:1-7)

Rejoice always (3:1)

So now we are ready to jump into Philippians Three. This places us about halfway through this amazing, passionate, encouraging letter written by Paul. It is one of my favorites and often where I send a new Christian (or inquiring person) to get a sense of what *true* Christianity is all about.

Paul begins by writing, *whatever happens, my dear brothers and sisters, we rejoice in the Lord*. If you think about it, this is quite an amazing statement by Paul. No matter what happens, we will rejoice! Wow! Has he not looked around to see what is going on in life? Well, of course, he did. Paul experienced just about everything possible on his missionary travels all over the civilized, Western world of that day. In his letter to the Thessalonians, he wrote, “In everything, give thanks to the Lord.” When I was young, carrying out my military obligation in Vietnam, an older, wiser man – a family friend – pointed out to me that Paul did not say to *feel thankful*. He simply said to *give thanks*. And that is an act of the will. It is something we can decide to do no matter how we feel. Hopefully, the emotions will follow. But the reason this meant so much to me was that the guy was

writing to me because his son, who had started taking LSD (and this destroys some people who take it, makes them nuts, depressed, and paranoid), ended up killing himself. He shot himself with his own shotgun and having heard a noise, his mom found him in the garage. He died in her arms. No one can begin to even imagine the grief and sense of loss for a mom who carried him to term, loved him so passionately, and invested so much of her life in helping him become the young man she so dearly loved! But to have someone write to me and tell me that no matter what happens, and in every circumstance, giving thanks (not feeling thankful) is the best thing to do. He told me that by doing this, something happens that orients a person with God and connects them with him so that, eventually, they will be able to feel thankful for what God allowed. I could not help but take notice because this man was not just preaching at me ... he was sharing the most difficult thing in life and how he responded to it.

I was just a young soldier over in Vietnam and raised in a Christian home, but I didn't know much about the Bible, except for a few famous verses like John 3:16. I think he was telling me to thank God for everything, even when I don't feel like it; to trust God, even if it's not easy; and just start by giving thanks. As hard as it is, we can all decide to do this, even though it doesn't make sense in difficult situations. But when we decide to trust God, something happens that changes us because our faith grows, even though it is ever so slight.

I think faith begets faith. If we believe and exercise faith, it somehow increases our faith. That's the way it works, and I think that's why God made the world the way he did. He could have made it so that faith was not at all required. He could have made everything so clear and undeniable that no one could avoid believing it. Or, God could give everyone a *Damascus Road* experience, like Paul had, where he was confronted directly and unmistakably by Jesus himself. But God rarely, if ever, does this. How come Paul gets one, and the rest of us must scratch our

heads and ask, “Just exactly how does this all work?” I think the reason is that it makes us *reach* spiritually. And when we reach, it makes us explore, think, ponder, and work through the whole concept of who God is and who we are. There's something about this *reaching* process that is actually good for us. Painful as it is, when we get into difficult situations, we can't help but seek, reach, and wait for an answer to come. Jesus put it this way, “Ask, seek, and knock.” Perhaps these are actions we must take in that order!

Paul then adds this short conclusion to all he has just said, *I never get tired of telling you these things because I know it will safeguard your faith.* That's basically what I was explaining above. When we decide to rejoice in the Lord, trust him, and give thanks in all things (no matter how we feel), it acts as a safeguard of our faith.

Watch out for those dogs (3:2)

Paul shifts gears in verse two, *watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who claim that you must be circumcised to be saved.* As we saw in Galatians, Paul is no fan of circumcision, even though he once helped require it as a Jewish Pharisee. Now he calls his former colleagues *dogs*, and he calls them *mutilators* because circumcision is a messy little operation. Frankly, it's kind of weird and gross, but it turned out to be a medically advantageous procedure.

As a young, single adult, I worked as a surgical orderly at Blodget Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan. What an education for a young guy fresh out of my three-year Army obligation! I saw every kind of *-opsy* and *-ectomy* possible, plus open-heart surgery. It is very messy, and the patient is so fully draped that they no longer look like a human subject. Once, I even had to carry an amputated leg down to the morgue in the basement wing. It's

amazing how heavy a human leg is! As for circumcision ... yep, saw that, too. One Jewish doctor, who was kind of a character, used to whistle Rock of Ages while performing a circumcision. Ya meet all kinds of people in life!

But I think Paul's use of the word *mutilation* was his way of expressing sarcasm in protest of Christians who chose to remain under the Jewish Law while claiming to follow Jesus. Part of their adherence to the Law of Moses was to require Gentile converts to be circumcised. This demonstrates early Christianity's entanglement with Judaism since most early believers were Jewish followers of Jesus. Paul, at one point in his endeavor to get the Good News message out for all to hear, swore off trying to convert Jews and turned his full attention to Gentiles (non-Jews). All of Paul's letters are to Gentile cities, located in modern-day Türkiye and the Greece Peninsula.

It is reasonably debatable if Paul always lived up to his own very high definition of love, thirteen behavioral qualities listed in his first letter to the Corinthians. He assured them that love is patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not proud, does not dishonor others, not selfish, not easily angered, doesn't hold grudges, does not delight in evil, rejoices in truth, protects, trusts, hopes, and never fails. That's a big list – in length and in stature! It doesn't seem to me that sarcastically calling people mutilators lives up to Paul's excellent and detailed definition of love. Paul was human; he got frustrated, angry, jealous, self-protective, and sarcastic. Such things are scattered in his writings. But despite this, Paul was also usually very compassionate and caring and seemed to understand the difficult plight that all people experience in life. According to him, he was a *chosen vessel of God*, one who was *born out of time* (came on the scene many years after the days of Jesus and his original twelve disciples). He claimed to receive direct revelation from Jesus which became the basis of his Good News message. For the most part, Paul lived up to his extraordinary claims.

I can't help but to find Paul and his life very compelling – just as I do Jesus (but much more so of Jesus.) What he wrote and taught have become the greatest words of life for me, with very few exceptions, like his occasional lack of love, his very high but unequal view of women, and his mistaken perspective that Jesus would return in the lifetime of his contemporaries. Jesus and the book of Revelation also seemed to have held that same mistaken view of an eminent Second Coming. These are some of the many problems in Christianity today that most Christians ignore. For me, it only further proves that God alone is perfect, infallible, inerrant, and completely trustworthy. All humans err in some way and to some degree. In the case of Jesus, this is indeed a dilemma. On one hand, how can he not be the Son of God in some special way, perhaps even being God himself in the flesh? His life and teachings are extraordinary and seem to rise far above all other teachers, rabbis, gurus, and prophets. Perhaps God designed it to be this way so that we will ultimately turn to him and depend on him and him alone for everything. Even Jesus seemed to be always setting an example of seeking, depending on, trusting, and glorifying the Father as the one true God.

However, many Christians give Paul more of a pass. They might say something like, “Yeah, he gets a little humorous and sarcastic. He even gets a little bit mean-spirited, but don't we all at times?” Well, this makes my point. Paul was human. I don't think we need to beat him up for it or reject his writings, but we are wise to see him as he is. Even Paul called himself “The chief of all sinners.” So, he knew his own failings and limitations. I have no doubt that he would be the first to say, “God alone is truly good!” In his letter to the Galatians, Paul expressed this same sarcasm, but more dramatically. He said, “I wish they'd just go all the way and castrate themselves!” Essentially, he is sarcastically saying, “You guys wanna do the religious ritual of circumcision on people? Well then, do a good job of it ... on yourselves.” I detect in Paul some anger – perhaps partly justified – toward

those who hung onto The Law, which he knew to be the greatest enemy of grace. He often contrasted these two ways of thinking in an attempt to free people to live in peace after discovering and accepting all that Jesus did on the cross to save them from such bondage of the Law!

Paul was, for sure, a pretty spunky and interesting guy. He'd been around the religious block a few times, and so his warning to "Watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who claim that you must be circumcised to be saved," was a very realistic and important warning – even though he was a bit sarcastic and not as tolerant and loving as he could have been. Circumcision, nor any other ritual, can ever save anyone. Paul knew this, and the use of such things to control people was rightly outrageous to Paul. We have plenty of this kind of thing going on today. Always be watching out for strongly stated claims, fearmongering, and all kinds of peer pressure that are used to rob you of your God-given freedom! Circumcision doesn't save in any sense whatsoever. It's just a ritual that maybe has some symbolic value for some people. But it's certainly not going to save you from anything, and even if it did, it could only save you from hanging out with the wrong people because it could keep you connected with a particular religious crowd. And this is about all that any ritual can do. Rituals, in and of themselves, are not bad or wrong. They just become wrong when misused, sometimes by well-intended people in religious leadership. Often, they are just doing what they were taught to do, carrying on some tradition that the masses usually do not know why they are carried out.

Paul's perspective on the limited use of The Law (including rituals) in our lives was that The Law was a *guardian* against sinning, but it was a very poor guardian. It worked somewhat, but not very well and had a lot of unwanted side effects. One huge side-effect was that with more law, humans instinctively want to sin all the more because they are so focused on trying not to sin! But when grace came, according to Paul, we can now do what's

right for the right reasons because we want to, because we love God, and because we are *new creations* in Christ! Law and rituals cannot save you spiritually, in eternity, or in any other significant way. If you like them, then do them. But don't let people use these to own you or bring fear or control into your life. Jesus has set us free, and therefore we are free indeed!

No confidence in self (3:3)

Those of us who worship by the Spirit of God are the truly *circumcised ones*. True circumcision – the substance behind the ritual – isn't a physical thing; it's a spiritual condition of the mind and heart. A *circumcised heart* is in tune with God, led by his Spirit, understands the Good News about Jesus, and as a result lives in freedom and peace. For the ancient Jews it was a distinction, a sign of official membership in the religious community. Notice it was always about males. It was something only males could do. Females were left out because they didn't really matter that much. A man was circumcised for himself, his wife, and his family. He decided what things they had to accept, good or bad, right or wrong. However, we have come a long way in 2000 years. The beauty of the Good News message that Paul preached was that “There is no male or female in Christ.” Peter described a man and a woman in marriage as being “joint heirs of the grace of life.” Early Christianity and all that has come from it (in spite of the church going off the rails in the Middle Ages) has helped elevate women to a position of equality with men, every bit as valuable to God and unconditionally loved by him, just as he does all people.

Paul continues by writing, *We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us*. Paul is saying that we don't rely on what we can do for ourselves. We only depend on what Jesus has done for us.

we put no confidence in human effort. Nor in symbolism, rituals, or law of any kind. Those things are not inherently bad; they're just not something we should put any trust in to save us or win us any favor with God. His favor is always there. It is called *grace*. Many attend church, do various rituals, and adhere to certain established traditions. It is what groups of people do in order to have a collective identity. It is okay, and God does not mind ... unless these become something that replaces him in some way. But even when they do, he never retaliates. His anger (if any) is *for* us, not *against* us. This means that he always wants the very best for everyone and will not settle for something cheap and ineffective – something that can never be of help to us like God himself can be – and instead insists that we focus on him, not rituals and symbols. Now, if rituals and traditions actually assist in helping a person be closer to God, then these can be good things. Communion elements of bread and wine (or juice), baptisms by dunking, pouring, or sprinkling, or even swinging the incense walking down a church aisle are all legitimate rituals if they help someone connect to God, help them visualize who God is in their life, and feel a sense of community with fellow believers. But keep in mind that God requires none of these to live in his grace, and some people seem to not need them because their sense of God's presence in their lives is more than sufficient! We need only to trust who God is and what he has already, and fully, done for us in Jesus.

If anyone could have confidence in self-effort, it would be me. If others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more. Now he's going to give his resume, and he's got a good one. Well ... a good one if you are a Pharisee. I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin. Now, that was a big deal because, historically, Benjamin was their favorite child

of Jacob. I am a real Hebrew if there ever was one. I was a member of the Pharisees who demanded the strictest obedience to the Jewish law, and they did, and they were proud of it. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed The Law without fault. And that may actually be true. Some Pharisees were highly moral (at least on the outside) and may have been able to keep the Ten Commandments, at least visibly. I doubt that anyone has perfectly followed the Tenth Commandment, which says, "Do not covet." Breaking that one is easy to hide, giving the appearance of fully keeping The Law which is mostly concerned with outward actions.

The ninth Commandment is an interesting one. It says, "Do not bear false witness." Most people think this is about lying. It certainly includes it, but this command has more to do with lying in a legal, public setting. Any society that can't have true and accurate testimonies can't ever govern itself. So, lying under oath was important, just as it is today. You can say what you want on the *campaign trail*, but when you're in court, under oath, you better tell the truth, or you're gonna be in trouble. There are penalties for perjury.

For the most part, Paul may have kept the law. He may not have committed adultery, not robbed or stolen anything. He may have honored his parents. But he certainly had committed murder when he persecuted all those Christians before his conversion. In his letter to the Romans, he mentions one command that he claims made him sin all the more. It is the tenth Commandment – coveting – that hung him up most. He wrote, "When The Law said, "Don't covet," it made me want to covet all the more!" That's what The Law tends to do. A command like that calls attention to what you don't have, and you start noticing everything else around you, wishing you could own more than you have. That's our human nature.

But probably, Paul kept The Law as well as anybody, and he wants to use this fact to make an important point. The Pharisees were mostly moral; they knew it and were proud of it. But they were also hypocrites because some of them were giving their wives a certificate of divorce so they could marry someone else whom they found more attractive in some way. And Jesus called them on it, telling them that this kind of divorce was just *legalized adultery*. Paul may have kept The Law pretty well, though not perfectly; however, he knew his own righteousness could match anyone else's.

Worthless in comparison (3:7)

Up to this point, Paul has set his readers up so he can present a very important principle that seemed to govern his new life in Christ. *I once thought these things were valuable*. I'm sure he did. He believed he was doing great things, and that God was pleased with him. In his Pharisee days, perhaps he was thinking, "God looks down and sees me; he also sees those dirty, rotten sinners out there, and obviously, I shine!" *But now, I consider these things worthless because of what Christ has done*. Christ coming, his teaching, living his life, being an example to all, dying on the cross in the place of sinners – that whole package of who Jesus was and what he accomplished puts everything in perspective.

Pharisees are the kind of people who have the hardest time seeing what Paul learned – that his most prized values were *rubbish* compared to knowing Jesus as the one who fully reveals God the Father. But they also had the most to lose with the prestige and honor that surrounded them daily, the great benefits package that came with their high position, and being one of only seventy if they were members of the Sanhedrin Council. Kings, leaders, and

church bishops were very engaging, simulating positions that were hard to give up.

Anything that comes along and shines a light on all the flaws in these self-righteous, proud people is a threat that must be eliminated. Jesus and Paul (along with many others) were this kind of threat. This is why they hated Jesus so much – not because he was so bad, but because he was so good. His goodness was clear to all. It was a light shining on the Jewish leaders, perhaps even more so than his words. I've often asked people, "If Jesus came today, who would the Pharisees be?" It's an uncomfortable question for anyone who has a conscience, has a reasonably accurate self-image, and knows how they size up in light of all who God must be in his moral excellence. But it is a good question to ask. In the days of Jesus, the Pharisees were the religious establishment, institutionalized religion. I'm not saying everyone in church leadership is a self-centered Pharisee, but this kind of position and setting was a *home* for them. If you're in high leadership of some sort, it is easy to fall into condescending those *dirty-rotten-sinners* who hang out in bars and live an undisciplined life. But these were the very people Jesus was most comfortable with. It is not that their lifestyle was something he approved of or joined, but he did not reject or condescend them either. He seemed to be much more bothered by the so-called righteous people (who really weren't) who lived in hypocrisy – something Jesus hated the most.

14. Giving It All Up (Philippians 3:8-11)

Become one with Christ (3:8)

Paul's life-changing perspective was so important to him that he restated it. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared to the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus, who is my Lord. Bible study, theology, religion, rituals, gurus, church gatherings, and worship services – everything is relatively worthless compared to the infinite value of knowing Jesus as Lord. And that is true for us today. I mean, knowing God, Jesus, as Lord of Life, walking with him daily, living for him, and having him live in us, eliminating fear and guilt, is indescribably wonderful! No more, "I better measure up, or God's going to be mad at me." That kind of nonsense doesn't get us anywhere. Instead, it's about walking with God just because he invites you to do so and says, "I love you. Come on into fellowship with me. Let's live together so you can become all I intended you to be!"

That's what Paul experienced, and he wanted everyone else to experience it, too, because it is infinitely more valuable than any of these other things in life, including the things he listed in his resume.

For Christ's sake, I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage in order to gain Christ and become

one with him. I think Paul would tell us that we can't have both. We can try, and many of us do, and we can have a little of one and a little of the other. Sure, we can get to know Jesus and God, live for him, and hang on to this other worthless stuff because it seems to suit us well and get us somewhere. But such things don't get us very far, and most of it is an illusion. I don't mean you have to quit being a leader in the church, but if that's your core value and identity (and it is very easy to fall into this without realizing it), then you won't be able to find contentment and peace fully in Christ. You'll experience something much less and relatively worthless.

Many Pastors have learned this the hard way. I remember at seminary, as a spiritually ambitious young man, eating lunch between classes, listening to the other young, ambitious guys making big plans about what they will do someday when they get *their* church. Many of us were groomed to pursue pastoring, usually because of some pastor who made a big impact in our lives. It was not a bad thing, but it was all too easy to get caught up in the euphoria of becoming like those who we admire most in life. I never became a pastor, although I really wanted to all my life until about age 60 when I began to see such ambition for what it was. Again, it was not a bad thing; there are plenty of worse things to go after in life. But I discovered, over time (just as many pastors have), that even pursuing such a good thing as ministerial service is worthless compared to simply knowing Jesus and walking with God daily. Once this is grasped, all other ambitions fall into place and become the "extra but unnecessary aspect" of life. Such peace, freedom, and real security come as a result!

Everyone must give up some kind of inferior things in life (not just pastors), even if they stay in a situation that has become more valuable than it actually is. The real giving up of such things – where it all must begin – is in your mind and in the quietness of your own heart. This is God's sacred place where real, lasting change happens. Outward appearances are ... well, just that ...

appearances with little substance. Once you have the right attitude, the “Mind of Christ,” which is what Paul called it in his first letter to the Corinthians, you can now fully embrace Jesus and walk with him. This is why Paul wrote, “For Christ’s sake, I have discarded everything, counting it as garbage so that I can gain Christ and become one with him.” It’s not about becoming a great theologian, Bible teacher, or church leader, but instead “one with Christ” as an individual, in the sacred privacy of our hearts and minds. And that’s where it counts!

I no longer count on my own righteousness by obeying the law. Rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. I don’t think Paul is saying that when we believe (exercise faith), something magical happens to us – except, perhaps, the *magic* of a changed life that we experience as a result of trusting God. Our act of faith never *earns* us anything with God. God does not suddenly say, “Oh, finally, you’ve turned to me. Now I can forgive you, and I won’t have to do something horrible to you in eternity for not believing.” That would be salvation by works – the works of believing as God’s requirement to earn favor. Remember, grace is “unmerited favor.” God favors us before and even during our acts of sin and unbelief.

I think Paul is saying that when we exercise faith, we come into a right relationship with God. And in that sense, we are “righteous.” However, we are *already* righteous because of what Jesus did on the cross for us. But by faith, we experience that forgiveness and salvation and begin engaging with God through his Spirit, which results in our lives greatly improving (though not perfect), living and experiencing a new kind of “righteousness”, the kind that is bestowed on us by God’s grace. With God, we become *righteous*, or in a right relationship with him, in a right standing with him, because that’s the only way we ever can. Only God can do it; all we can do is receive it, experience it, and say, “Thank you, God.” That intimate and personal process of

believing is the way in which we become rightly connected to God.

God's way is by faith (3:9b)

Paul continues to explain how faith operates in our lives. *God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith.* In other words, God's way of bringing us into a right relationship with himself, making us clean, and no longer under the penalty of sin is by faith. The penalty of sin is not a penalty from God. Sin is what we do, and it destroys us, not God. We bring it on ourselves. What God does is save us from sin (actually, saving us from ourselves). God's work is always in the opposite direction. He saves, redeems, restores, and corrects us. He does not further pile on some kind of retaliation simply because we have sinned, with a goal of destroying us, annihilating us, or punishing us eternally. John wrote in his Gospel account that "Jesus came into the world to save it, not condemn it." John further writes that we condemn ourselves when we choose darkness over light (falsehood over truth). God is always at work to correct us and make us whole.

That's all accomplished by Jesus himself on the cross. Interestingly, the word "justified" is used in many translations instead of "making us right." I can think of three different ways the word *justified* is used in the New Testament – twice by Paul and once by James. Paul's primary, and perhaps his most important and foundational use of the word *justified* is in chapter three of his letter to the Romans. There he wrote, "We are justified (or made right) by God through the blood of Christ." That is, by his death. This is a huge idea, and it's the big dog in the ideas of *being made right* because it is what God has done for us, through Jesus, by grace (unearned favor), making us right with himself and placing us in good stead with him by taking away our sin.

Keep in mind that this *taking away sin* does not mean that we never sin. Quite the opposite. God takes away the sins that we have all committed – past, present, and future. It is not so much a *prevention* program (though it includes that), but a correction, healing, restoring, and purifying program that God brings about in every lost sinner who has ever lived. He's not going to fail. He is going to, eventually, make everything right in the universe, reconciling everyone to himself. It is what Jesus came to do, and he cannot – he will not – fail to accomplish his noble mission. Our sins are taken away because of what Christ did, not what we do – not even our faith takes away our sin, only Jesus can do that, and he does.

But then, a second way in which we are justified (made right with God) is by our faith. This is a major theme of Paul in many of his letters. But this kind of making us right (justifying) is different from the kind we receive from the death of Jesus. We are made right when we believe, and so we come into a right relationship with God. It is something we do, but it is not something by which we *earn* anything with God. We only *gain* something with him, something he has provided for us, and we can only experience it by trusting God. Think about it. Once we believe, we enter into a right relationship with God and believing is the only way we can do this. How could we ever have any kind of active relationship with God if we do not believe in him? I say *active* because he already has a relationship with us, whether we realize it or not. He loves us and is always at work in our lives “to will and to do,” as Paul pointed out earlier in this letter. And so, when we're made right with God, we become rightly related to him and enjoy all the benefits of knowing him and walking with him daily.

But there is also a third way in which we are *justified* (made right) before God. James wrote in his New Testament letter that we are “made right with God by works and not by faith alone.” This is directly and purposely in opposition to what Paul wrote

about people being justified by faith and not works. Just as it is today, people in ministry (even when on the same side in the spiritual battle) honestly disagree or just have a different perspective. In the case of James and Paul, there was clearly an ongoing tension between their differing views of Jesus, grace, salvation, and law. Paul refers to this struggle many times in his letters, seeing the original Jewish followers of Jesus as too law-oriented and not enough grace. James' letter is a clear indication of this struggle and is in quite some contrast to Paul's writings, which emphasize grace over law. However, these two followers of Jesus were on the same side of the struggle, with different perspectives and emphases. It could very well be that both views bring something to the overall discussion about salvation, and we are wise to look carefully at each and find the important things each one is saying.

I think James is using this same word, justified (to make right) differently, making a different point than Paul does. If we think about it, when we start doing what's right (do good works, as James calls it) because of being rightly related to God by faith, we are, in a very real sense, made right even more by our works because we are demonstrating that we are in active fellowship with God. This seems to be what James is saying, and he seems to be concerned about people just exercising faith and never getting around to doing anything about it. He goes on to show how faith is only real when it has a tangible result. In some ways, Paul and James are saying the same thing – that we are made right with God – but one emphasizes *faith* and the other *good works* that should result. But what is important is that neither faith nor works earn anything with God because salvation is by God's grace and cannot be earned in any way whatsoever. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Ephesians.

So, we're rightly related to God because of what Jesus did, because we believe, and because of what we do as a result of our faith. And, when we're made right with God, we come into an

even better relationship with him because we're doing the kinds of things he wants us to do. It's like what Jesus said, "I only do what I see the Father doing." He was in a right relationship with God the Father, which resulted in him doing good things in life. By faith, we can do the same and live the same kind of life he did with the Father!

So, there are three different ways that the word *justified* is used, in which we are *made right* with God. But none of these have anything to do with us earning something from God. This is very important to understand. When we do good works, it doesn't earn us anything. We're just doing good work! Hey, good for us. God is pleased by it. But even if we don't, God won't do something horrible to us. Instead, he will roll up his sleeves and get working in our lives so that we will, eventually, do those good works and live a satisfied life closer to him! So, when we believe and do good works, it doesn't earn us anything with God. He doesn't say, "Finally, you believe, and you're starting to do something right. Okay, I guess I won't have to send you to hell forever as I was planning to do before you got straightened out!". No. Instead, he just says. "Welcome home, child. I love you so much. I always knew I would be successful in your life, but I took the time needed to let you learn everything necessary for you to fully appreciate and enjoy the salvation I have brought into your life,"

Knowing Christ and experiencing power (3:10)

So, Paul concludes with this, *I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead.* Paul does not seek to become a better Old Testament scholar, build a big mega-church, or have a lot of people think he's really great. He needs not to be the Apostle Paul (with a capital A), flashing his fancy title and wearing fancy robes causing people to say, "Oh, there goes Paul the Great. He is so impressive!" He didn't care about any of that because he had his fill of it from his

Pharisee days. Instead, he says he only wants “to know Christ and experience his mighty power.” That’s it, no more or less. It was all he needed in his new and wonderful identity with the risen Jesus.

Notice that this mighty power Paul desires is not that of his own. It is not a power found in his own might, strength, abilities, skills, or persona. This does not mean that Paul never employs any of these good things that God has granted him; he does not ultimately depend on them and realizes how limited they are in the grand scheme of life. We are wise to strike such a balance by always being ready and willing to employ whatever abilities and skills God has granted us, yet also know how limited we are and that we need the strength only God can give us, which best comes through faith in Jesus as savior and lord of our lives. God will not bring all the power of the universe on us. We wouldn’t be able to handle it, anyway. But he does bring the strength and power that we need, no more or less. It often seems too little *too late*, but it’s not. It is always on time and in just the right amount to meet the moment so that we are neither *babied* by God nor abandoned by him. Sometimes, he waits for a later time to empower us because he knows what we need to learn, how we need to learn it, and what great and wonderful things we will gain from it in due time, better than anything gained in any other way with any other timing. For sure, this requires a lot of faith on our part, and when we are going through difficult times, it can be hard to keep believing. But this is how we grow, and this is what God wants for us because he knows we will, eventually, be better off. We will discover how much better it is and thank him forever!

Paul wanted the power and strength that only come by knowing and living in Christ. It is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, comes into our lives, enables us, and helps us to do what’s right. Sometimes we foolishly fight against God. Have you ever done this? You’re not alone. It is normal, and this is exactly why we need God’s strength: we will never find it in

ourselves. We can thwart the Spirit, grieve him, and tell God *no*, in big and small ways. Fortunately, God does not respond with, “Okay, ya got a bad attitude, and I can see you're not going to change. And so, I'm done with you.” Instead, he says. “Okay, you want to do it the hard way. Your choice. But I'm sticking around. I'm not done with you. I love you and I am determined to correct, restore, and save you from your own foolish self. This is what I do; It's what I do in everyone's life because it is what love does. I *am* love! I'll see you when you crawl out the other end of this dark tunnel you've decided to enter. I'll be there. I won't pull you back out by your feet and prevent you from going through this. In my wisdom, I can see that this is what you need to do. So, go ahead, and then when you come out, we'll pick up right where we left. Then, you'll know more than you did and be ready to learn, understand, and experience my grace and the power that only I can have in your life.” So, God never wastes anything in our lives and always works for our best. It is what love does!

Suffering with Christ (3:10b)

Now Paul adds an unusual request. *I want to suffer with Christ, sharing his death, so that no matter what, I will experience the resurrection from the dead.* Wow. Now that's a big statement and a heck of a request. I am willing to suffer for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel (the Good News message), as are so many other Christians. But I don't think I'm up for *requesting* it! I sure don't want to invite suffering in any way. But, perhaps, Paul knows something I don't know. Or, more likely, his situation was dire. He only had one goal in life: to spread the Good News for the remainder of his days. He was all-in and fully committed. However, everyone has their trial in life. We all have some idea of what Paul is talking about. A willingness to do

whatever God brings into our lives brings us peace. It is not the trial that brings us peace but our proper response to it.

Before the Fourth Century, things were so much different in the early church. They lived under greater persecution and what little freedom they had was very limited. It's even recorded in the New Testament book of Acts that after some of the Apostles had been beaten, they "rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer in the name of Jesus." They lived in those early days, just after Jesus lived and had risen from the dead. Life wasn't about going to Disneyland and experiencing all the freedoms we have today that we so easily take for granted. There is nothing wrong with living an enjoyable life when offered, but they were totally into "How can we live for God? How can we share this great message of hope with others as we live in a very difficult, oppressive world? We're not looking for persecution. We're not masochists. But if we get persecuted, afterward when we're done, even if it's physical or verbal, or we lose some privileges and opportunities in society, we're going to rejoice and say, "Thank you, God, for considering us worthy to suffer for you." That's what they said. That was their attitude. What kind of people were these?

I'm not there yet, and I may never be. Perhaps we must be in their limited situation to see the value of such a noble decision. I think we have all learned *some* of what they learned, and we're more willing to suffer than we were in the past, but I doubt that very many Christians are prepared nor have the mindset for such commitment and dedication. But, who knows, maybe if the time came for us to face what they did, God would provide the grace and wisdom for us to see and act as they did. But, still, it is a tall order.

Paul wanted to and was willing to share in Christ's death. It wasn't just a willingness to eventually die of old age – we've all got to do that. It was more of a willingness to die the kind of death that Jesus did if called on to do so ... humiliating, painful,

and cutting life shorter than it should have been. This takes seeing life from a bigger perspective – an eternal one. This is not impossible, but it usually takes an uncontrollable situation that requires a much bigger view of life to decide wisely. Most of these early Christians, along with Paul, knew that they had very little to lose ... only a life they could not keep – and everything to gain, which was eternal life with God who made them, loved them and was always working in their lives to draw them closer to himself.

For Paul, it was a pretty specific view of life and Jesus. He knew that we are all dying because of sin and that Jesus came into the world to join humanity, head it up as the final Adam, and die with us, which guaranteed that when he rose from the dead, we, too, would someday rise with him to live forever. Paul spells this out in the sixth chapter of his letter to the Romans. This is how he lived. This was his perspective. It's why he got up daily and spread the Good News message about Jesus. We, too, can live with this same purpose in life, except we also have jobs, family, friends, and freedom. However, the key to all good things being truly good is knowing Christ, experiencing his power in our lives, and being willing to suffer for him if ever the time comes.

Paul knew that the ultimate salvation would be that day when all humanity is raised from the dead (because Jesus was raised and guaranteed that we would, too) and have a new body and purified soul, leaving behind the old person who we once were, plagued with sin and destruction in this life. In one sense, we're presently saved (delivered), and our fellowship with God is part of that *ultimate* salvation. What we experience now is only the beginning. Paul wrote to the folks in Corinth that the "eye has not seen, nor has ear heard all of the good things God has in store for us," someday when his saving work is complete. That resurrection from the dead is the ultimate goal and the ultimate salvation because that's when everything is complete. There's no better or higher place to go. We're done. We have arrived! It will be a great day, and we will all be amazed at how good it will be. This is

always God's ultimate goal for his world, and everything he does and allows works perfectly toward that good goal.

15. Looking Forward and Upward (Philippians 3:12-21)

Plagued by the past

Most people struggle, to some degree, with their past. And the older we get, the more *past* there is to deal with. Some people live with huge regrets that they never seem to be able to live down, even though they have been completely forgiven by God for all wrongdoing and foolishness. Emotions are hard to escape. We can know we are forgiven, believe it, and even be thankful for it, yet feel bad about our past and live in regret. Some others are eventually able to move on and leave the past behind. But even then, it is not easy, and it takes time. This is why God wants us to be free from sin. It is so terribly destructive, and we don't see just how horrific it is until long after we have lived through all the consequences.

In this next section of Paul's letter, he will deal with our struggles to leave the past behind and focus on our new life in Jesus. Paul, of all people, knew how hard this was to do; I'm sure he struggled with it for many years. Perhaps this is part of why the prep time God had for him was so long – fourteen years – before he turned Paul loose to spread the Good News about Jesus and all he had done for humanity.

In some ways, leaving the past behind is pretty *simple*, but it's not *easy*. Whatever you did in the past is done. It can't be taken back. But this is a double-edged sword. On one hand, since we cannot change the past, it's a no-brainer to move on. But that is the logic of it; none of us are purely logical. We all have feelings about the past, present, and future in the form of worries. And it is this logical thing that so grates on our emotions – that we can't change the past. Logically, we have every reason to move on, but emotionally, we can't because the feelings do not easily disappear. You can't do anything about it ... so don't try. Don't worry about it. Don't hang on to it and feel bad about it forever. However, this is easier said than done.

The other extreme is to ignore the past. Many people do this, but it festers like an infected wound, causing irritation beneath the surface every day. Don't ignore the past and say, "I didn't do that stuff." Yes, you did! Or say, "It doesn't matter." Yes, it does ... but it doesn't have to be forever. Much of being able to move on is acknowledging your sins and failures, learning from them, and then starting anew. Skipping this will never work, except, maybe, for a while in the short run. But once you admit where you have failed, you can begin to learn from it and, eventually, be free from it. But it takes time. We have to be patient with ourselves and even forgive ourselves, which is sometimes the hardest person to forgive. Realizing how completely God has forgiven us is the start, and it is really the only solution. Once you see how much God has forgiven you, you can then begin to forgive yourself and move on. I have a friend who says, "Regrets are often the best teacher."

Whatever it was, whatever happened to you, or whatever you did ... throw it away. Move on to that higher calling of God, in Christ! This is the one thing we can choose to do in life and is also the most freeing thing we will ever do. It's not complicated, but it's hard. It's hard because as soon as you do this, five minutes later, you're thinking about it again. This is normal and human.

This is why it takes some time to learn how to move on. But God is faithful and will be with you every moment. About the time you want to quit, he will lift you up so you can carry on and gain some ground that you will never lose again. This is a slow but sure process. It is so easy to relive the past in our minds and feel guilty. Thoughts of “I’m such a terrible person” plague us, and then we rehearse all that stuff, and it destroys us if we give in to it. But we don’t have to, and Paul is about to bring some encouragement, which is yet another of the many memorable passages in this letter.

Forgetting the past and looking forward (3:12)

Paul introduces his section on dealing with the past with, *I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection*. By “these things,” he means suffering with Christ, sharing his death, and experiencing the resurrection. Though he boldly stated what his desires were, he also wanted his readers to know he had not achieved his desires yet. He probably did not want it to sound like he'd already *arrived* and was better than everybody else. Paul usually comes across in his letters as a genuinely humble guy. Considering where he came from (a high-ranking Pharisee) and where he was now after encountering the risen Jesus, humility probably came and found him.

But then Paul, after his disclaimer, moves on to his life-changing principle in dealing with his past. *However, I continue to seek such perfection in the same way that Jesus once sought me. Therefore, I focus on just one thing: I Forget about my past and, instead, look forward to what lies ahead for me. I strive to keep running life's race so that I will receive the heavenly prize to which God is calling us through Christ*

Jesus. I don't believe Paul ever totally forgot about his murderous past. I think he is saying that he no longer focuses on it since there is nothing he can do to change it. This is such an excellent way of thinking. It is the epitome of optimism, and it's based on something solid – Jesus – and not just hopeful thinking. We can throw away the past once we have learned from it and focus on the future. Since we can't do anything about the past, this is a totally logical conclusion. But emotions are not so easily swayed, so this is no easy lift! But realize that we all have *disposable* pasts. This must be something we learn and say to ourselves, "Okay, that's what I learned from the mistakes I made. Now I'm going to throw my past away, and I'm not going to even think about it anymore because I grabbed everything that's good from my past, which is learning what to do and what not to do in the future!" When we take on this kind of thinking, we can appreciate God and other people so much more. Now we can move on and look to the future in a higher calling that is from God through trusting Jesus.

So, this is a key passage for me and for so many people because it's so easy to live in the past. We can be haunted by, "I could have ... should have ... would have, and I'm such a terrible person." That kind of thinking is paralyzing, and it's got to go. It can be let go of for good reason ... simply because God has given us a new and higher calling to himself through Jesus and all he has done for us. Don't miss out on what's presently best by dwelling on the past, which represents the worst. Otherwise, we are trying to emotionally deal with something we can't change! Think about it. We are fighting a losing battle, and we are defeated before we even begin. We are just plain old stuck! Stuck in time, stuck in the past, stuck in our little world of dwelling on things we cannot change. This is just foolish, but it need not be this way.

Actually, this life-changing principle that Paul has presented about dealing with the past can be experienced and appreciated by anyone ... if they are strong enough on their own to do it. It

is not complicated and very logical. Leave the past behind (which you can't change) and focus on the future. A person need not be religious and even a Christian. This works for anyone who will employ it. But the problem is that this is hard to do, even though it is quite simple. And this is where knowing Christ is the key. The power and strength (and perspective) that is needed to accomplish such a hard thing in life is most successfully found in knowing Jesus and what he has done for us. A few strong people in this life can forget the past and move on (and we all do this to some degree), but there are few who can do this completely and then begin a whole new life, all in their own effort. Paul found a way to do this, and even though he was a very strong person, he would be the first to tell you that he could only do it by the power of knowing Jesus and trusting God through him.

Once we see that God has a purpose in everything – in what he causes and allows – to prepare us for better things, we can rejoice in whatever happened to us and by us in the past. Sure, we wish things did not happen, but we now have every reason to move on to that *upward calling* by God into our future. The future is gonna be okay, and we can move on. It doesn't have to own us the rest of our lives!

Spiritual maturity (3:15)

Paul moves on in his thinking, *Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things*. Yes, it makes sense that spiritually minded people would quickly agree with Paul on how to handle the past. But it does take a bit of spiritual maturity to get past the heavy emotions usually associated with the past. We all pretty much get there the hard way, and not everyone is spiritually mature. However, there is no pride for one who is spiritually mature since there had to be a time when they were not! Plus, if they are proud of their spiritual maturity ... then they

are not really spiritually mature; they just think they are! So, there's no bragging.

If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you. Hey, I love this. This is good. If you disagree with Paul on some point he has made, it's not his fault but yours! Ha! And God will have to straighten you out. Paul probably did not mean it quite that cynically. But this is the kind of claim that commonly comes from most religious people. If you disagree with them, you must be wrong because they know they are not. This is how I define "religion," except for the kind of religion that James wrote about in his letter, where he defined *true* religion as the act of taking care of others in need (like widows and orphans) and focusing on your own spiritual life, and not so much that of others. I think Paul just meant that God would make things clear to others who do not see this or don't believe it because he knew only God could open eyes and change a heart. Perhaps he would tell them, "What I teach and what I write, if you take it to God, and he tells you I'm full of it, then throw it away. Go with what God tells you every time. But if he verifies it for you in some way, listen to him and go do what works."

I've got a friend who's read my Galatians commentary, and it really helped him. It is all about Paul telling the Galatians to never go back under The Law and how foolish he thought they were for doing just that. My friend told me, "I know you've studied, and so I'll just believe what you do." My response was, "Bro, you need to take every idea to God and ask him to show you the truth. Never, totally, blindly trust me or anyone else!" So, perhaps, Paul was just saying something like this to his readers.

But then, after he said. "God will make it plain to you," he added, *but we must hold on to the progress we've already made.* Paul is telling them never to go back and to maintain the

progress made so far in their spiritual lives. We've all made progress. We've all grown in our spiritual life. We are wise to hang on to that and go from there. We are smart to move on to the things God has for us in the future. Leave the past behind, and don't let go of the progress you've already made. Right? But people can (and do) make progress and then go back. Why? How is this possible? They give up the ground they have gained, but that is typically human. Jesus didn't come just to save us from sin; he also came to remove the short-sightedness that sets in even after we have been successful and tasted how good God is when he is present in our lives. It is also typical for people to make progress, then lose some ground, then make more progress, lose more ground, etc. Most of us do this; some do it in the extreme. But God is always patient with us, never leaving or giving up, ensuring that we will, eventually, make it! This is why Paul told them to "hold on to the progress you have made."

Enemies of the cross (3:17)

Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine and learn from those who follow our example. I don't think Paul's saying he's perfect. He started this section by saying he had not yet reached perfection. But he is saying, "I've learned a lot, and you can learn from me. This life of living in Christ is the only way to go. Give it a try! Since it works for me, I am probably a pretty good example, as are many others. Ultimately, go check it out with God. He is your final authority, and Jesus is your ultimate pattern to follow."

Often, we encounter people we appreciate; they've become spiritually mature and moved on in life. When we do, we can safely conclude that we can learn some good things about life from them. So, they become an example to us, someone we can pattern our life after, not in every way and in every detail since we are all different. But basically, and generally, watching them and

living as they do is usually a safe bet – unless we start following them exclusively instead of God.

I've told you before, and I'll say it again with tears in my eyes, that there are many out there whose actions demonstrate that they are enemies of the Cross of Christ. Yes, there are spiritual enemies out there of all kinds. However, God doesn't make them *his* enemy; they make God *their* enemy. Paul may be correct in his criticism of these other people, but keep in mind that it is so easy to find fault with other Christians when we don't understand what they are saying and doing, nor do we understand why. We just know they do not agree with us (not how we want them to, anyway), so we feel we must call them out and identify them as off-base, heretics, or false teachers. Sometimes we are correct, and God is honored by our defense of factual information and the truth. But other times it is just a case of good old bigotry, and we are intolerant of what is unfamiliar to us because we don't understand it. Keep in mind, also, that sometimes *we* are heretics and false teachers. No one is perfect, nor possesses all the truth. It does not take much for anyone to be inaccurate in some way or another. So, we are wise to tread lightly and "get the huge wooden beam out of our own eye before we try to get a small spec out of someone else's eye," as Jesus once taught.

As for Paul, he seems to have gotten many (perhaps most) things right, and so I tend to give him the benefit of the doubt. Yet I keep in mind the exhortation he gave in his letter to the Romans, "All have sinned and fall short of God's perfection." Sometimes I get frustrated because Christians (especially well-intentioned but *annoying* Evangelicals) become the biggest blockade to those who are unbelievers. I admit that I have been guilty of this in the past and may very well still be guilty somewhat today. I am in no way above the fray in the problem of driving people away from God. We throw around words like *heretic* and

false teacher far too often. We tend to apply it to anyone outside our fold.

For sure, there were enemies of the cross and the Good News message, just as there are today. Paul has correctly pointed this out, and we should be on guard against such people. But we also need to be careful about such identification, do our homework (on those we want to criticize, as well as our own beliefs), and be fair-minded and gracious toward others, just as we want to be treated. Remember, we can be wrong, too, and we are wise to love people, give them the benefit of the doubt, realize that God works differently in different people's lives, and seek unity where it can be found without being naive and deceived. This is indeed a tall order, but seeking God directly in these matters is essential.

Headed for destruction (3:19)

Paul continues his criticism of those he sees as enemies of the cross. *They're headed for destruction.* Now, the word *destruction* doesn't mean go to hell. It is only one of many New Testament Greek words that people assume to mean that God will do something horrible to people in eternity. Judgment, justice, condemnation, curse, and punishment are just a few of the other words. But none of these words, in the Greek language (the language in which the New Testament was written), are such that a reader must conclude that God will act in some kind of non-corrective action, in pure retaliation against humanity that he created and supposedly so loves! Many Christians, when they read the word *destruction* in their English Bible, will conclude, "Oh, that means they're going to be tormented forever by God in hell." Well, they are as entitled to their opinion as anyone else, but the word *destruction* has nothing to do with eternity. It just means to tear down, disable, ruin, etc. An author *can* use this word to represent some kind of eternal action, but this would have to be

demonstrated by the context in which it was used. The surrounding words would have to indicate this since this word alone is incapable. This is why interpretation of the Bible, or any ancient writing, is so important. People seldom realize how easily they take on someone's interpretation and make it absolute truth simply because they blindly trust the sources they are listening to.

This same word, destruction, is used in John 3:16 when it talks about "those who believe will not *perish* but have eternal life." Why use a different word there other than just destroy? The same Greek word is used in both places in the Greek text. This is a clear case of translators choosing English words that best reflect their interpretation based on the theology they have inherited from Roman Catholicism and the Reformation. They might argue that since the word *eternal* is also used in the same verse as *perish*, that this is the best choice. But *perish* is just a more dramatic word that easily lends itself to the idea of eternal torment.

The choice of the English word *eternal* in John 3:16 can also be misleading. The word used here, in Greek, is the word for *age*, or "indefinite time period." This is a word that has more to do with *orientation* than *duration*. If by "eternal life," the translators mean "life associated with eternity," that seems reasonable. But if by using *eternal* rather than *age* (time-period), they are trying to imply never-ending or everlasting, it is misleading. And this is exactly how masses of people are indoctrinated into believing that God will eventually bring never-ending torment on most of humanity, abandoning all corrective and redeeming purposes whatsoever. This seems shameful to me and a great tragedy when God is tagged with such horrible things, doing so by purposely mistranslating Greek words and promoting a particular interpretation in order to indoctrinate people into following them!

One Greek teacher, Daniel B. Wallace of Dallas Seminary (where I graduated), taught me through my reading of his *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* that "translations are always, to some

degree, interpretations.” So, I’ve learned to be careful, do my homework, and not just assume that whatever I read from some supposed *expert* is always true!

So, Paul says they are headed for destruction, and they are. But there is no reason to believe he means anything beyond destruction in this life. Interestingly, almost all other uses of the word *destruction* in the New Testament use this word in a temporal sense, having to do with some kind of destruction in this life, including the destruction of one’s reputation. Words do not always need to be slammed to some kind of extreme in order to prop up and further some particular interpretation – especially when it is done to instill fear into people in order to gather a larger following behind some popular figure who is assumed to be true. Be aware, do your homework, think for yourself, and take everything directly to God and ask him to show you the truth!

Their god is their appetite (3:19b)

Paul continues his criticism. *Their God is their appetite*. This might be more clearly stated, “Their appetite is their god.” Paul is not referring to just the desire for food, although this would be included. He is talking about an appetite for anything. People have many kinds of appetites and, in varying degrees – sex, power, wealth, gambling, drugs, etc. Some people have an appetite so strong that it dominates their lives. It owns them. Their *appetite* for certain things can become so strong it absorbs them, their time, money, focus, and whole being. In this way, their appetite becomes their god. It consumes them when it owns them, and they end up chasing after these things, yet they are never satisfied, which makes the chase endless and unsatisfying. They seek more *things*, more comfort, and pleasure, but it all means nothing, and then life gets cynical. If you get too many *things*, and if your appetite for them becomes your god, you’ll never be happy.

More details from Paul. *They brag about shameful things, and they think only about this life here on earth.* See, that's the problem. We get focused on what we can possess, here and now, and how much more we can own than other people. It's a failed attempt to satisfy something in ourselves that can't be satisfied. Things, possessions, positions in life, and being admired will only temporarily satisfy you, leaving you only wanting more. Alexander the Great developed an appetite to conquer, but after he had conquered the whole civilized, Western world of that day, he wept bitterly because he wanted more. He was not satisfied, and he never could be because his god was his own appetite for power. As Paul put it, they think "only about this life here on earth."

But when we are *one with Christ*, in the secret moments of our lives, in the middle of the night when we know we're not alone, it sets the stage for everything else. We don't need anything else because God has given us the riches and satisfaction that only come by seeing beyond earthly things. This does not mean we ignore or shun the good things God has given us in this life. But it does mean that we do not place them as a higher priority. Some people focus on what they have, here and now, and tip their hats at eternal things because they believe in God, attend church, and are in some way religious. But God wants all of who we are, not just part. But he wants this for us, not himself! He knows we will never be happy based on ourselves, and when we focus on him, get that big perspective of eternity, and live in Christ, understanding all he has done for us, only then will we be satisfied and not need to fulfill some unfulfillable appetite. So, Paul rightly concludes, "Their god is their appetite," and "They think only about this life here on earth."

Citizens of heaven (3:20)

Paul now brings a huge contrast. *But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus lives.* I do not take heaven to be a location in outer space somewhere. Instead, it's that realm of the immaterial world, the spiritual realm, which will turn out to be more real than this material world ever was. But right now, all we know is our five senses, space and time, and all that is real to us in our limited domain. Yet, there seems to be some other realm that almost everyone has some sense of. It is out there and is very hard to deny. Sure, there are a few true atheists, but they are few and far between in the grand scheme of life. Most people believe there is something or someone out there beyond what we can perceive with our senses, even though they confess that they don't know exactly what it is. Religion, in some shape and form, is pervasive in life and always has been. When the deepest, darkest jungles of Africa are breached, religion – some kind of belief in a reality beyond their own – is found among the crudest and most uncivilized natives. Even Helen Keller, who was born blind and deaf, when she was finally able to communicate at about age twelve, said that she always knew there was someone there, some God or spiritual entity. She only had three senses, which greatly limited her, but still, in her isolation, she intuitively knew there was a God.

Paul says we're "citizens of heaven," citizens of that other realm "where the Lord Jesus lives." This is where we really belong, where we are really located spiritually. Our ultimate place and identity are there (in heaven) and not here (on earth). But this earth is all we know with our five senses, so it is not insignificant. Life is not ultimately *about* this life, but it does *include* it. God wants us to live this life as a precious gift from him, but he wants us to do so in a way that we never lose sight of what is truly important, which is eternity. This life does not shed light on eternity as much

as it sheds light on this life. Get it backward, and you'll never be satisfied or at peace, and your appetites will be your gods.

Jesus, when he died and rose from the dead, did not go to a location called heaven; he went into another realm, one that is totally different from the realm in which we live. That's where he went, and it's where we're going. One way or another, sooner or later, everybody's getting out of here and moving on into eternity. I'm personally thankful for that. I don't want to spend eternity on this earth in all its messiness. I can only handle so many elections! Ha! And at nearly 75, I think I only have to endure a few more cycles. I'm sure every older person in the history of time has felt this way. We learn a lot, see a lot, and find out how relatively temporary and futile this world is in and of itself. Without the presence of God to make it meaningful, it's like being on a hamster wheel, going round and round, and getting nowhere that matters. I'm happy to let the next generation think it's really cool and vote for the person they want, just as I did. But they will also learn what I have, in due time, that life can only deliver so much, and there must be something beyond that gives it all real meaning. Well, there is! And it is all found in knowing God, realizing how much he loves you, that he will never leave or forsake you, always wants the very best for you, and will not give up until he brings you safely home to live with him forever. Being a "citizen of heaven" is all about this. It sure isn't about being a citizen of this world, even though we are temporarily.

Paul goes on to give his readers even more encouragement. *We are eagerly waiting for Jesus to return as our savior.* Yeah, I'm looking forward to that, too! People have been looking forward to this for 2000 years. *He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power he will use to bring everything under his control.* That power that Jesus had to raise people from the

dead was the same power by which he created this world in the first place. And so, he will be able to bring everything under his control in a very complete and final way. He's not going to use this power to send the majority of humanity to hell in never-ending torment, keep them there, and laugh at them for not believing and/or sinning. That is what I was told all my life, as they quoted Bible verses, such as, "He in the heavens laughs at them." What kind of God does this? Certainly not the God of the universe who created and so loved his world that he sent his own son to save it! Instead, he will bring everything under his control, make things right, and "reconcile everything in heaven and earth to himself." How could he ever do anything less and still be God? He never fails because "Love never fails," and he will accomplish the mission he clearly came to do – save the world, rendering him "Savior of the world!"

16. Rejoice!

(Philippians 4:1-7)

You are my joy and my crown (4:1)

We now launch into Philippians Four, which is a great *memorable passages* chapter. It's got a lot of practical things. It has several memorable verses, like the ones I've called attention to before. This fourth chapter also has the passage from which the title of this commentary was taken, "The Peace of God from the God of Peace."

Paul starts by writing, *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stay true to the lord*. Therefore? Why does he start out this way? *Therefore* is a connecting word. It is how a writer signals his readers not to forget and attach what is about to be written back to what was previously said. Paul does this a lot; His writings tend to be logical progressions. Though he was a Jew, he was very Greek in much of his thinking. Being well-schooled, his broad education of that day and being a Roman citizen placed him in a culture created by Alexander the Great just a few centuries before. Alexander made Greek the official language of his expanding empire. Paul was a recipient of this, and his high-level education reflected it. The main reason that the New Testament was written in Greek is because that language became the common trade language of the Roman Empire, much like English is today worldwide.

So, Paul wants them to keep in mind what he just wrote as they consider his next set of ideas. He addresses them as “dear brothers and sisters.” He’s always an affectionate person for a crusty old guy who used to drag Christians out of their houses and kill them. He had changed. Something happened over that fourteen-year period when he was off the grid, after the time the risen Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus. What went on during those fourteen years? Nobody knows for sure. He gives some hints in his second letter to the Corinthians, but what is for sure is that it took time. It always takes time in any of our lives for God to teach us and change us. Paul had a whole background of living that had to be processed, thought about, and brought into perspective, sorting out what to keep and what to discard. Have you ever done this? I sure have, many times in life, and even at nearly 75, I am still sorting and finding better things, thanks to God, who is so faithfully working in all of our lives.

Paul worked with Jesus, either directly (meeting with him out in the Arabian Desert, as he claimed), or he may have encountered Jesus more *spiritually* than physically, the way many of us feel that we do today. He may have spent most of his time contemplating his past with all the new things he was taught as he encountered Jesus. He did this in the most basic way, without trying to be an apostle or pharisee or anything else. He may have been in *neutral-ville* for most of the fourteen years until he was ready for prime-time ministry. No doubt, God’s timing was perfect. But that’s a long time to learn, think, pray, and perhaps study. He may have thought, “This is taking way too long. I’m ready to go!” But God would have said, “Wait! Your day will come soon enough.” Have you ever had to wait longer than you thought you should? God’s timing is always right, even when we don’t understand. This is so good to know. We can *rest* when we find ourselves in such situations. Paul understood what it meant to “Stay true to the Lord” because he lived it.

Paul continues expressing his affection for these dear people. *I love you and long to see you, dear friends, for you are my joy. You are the crown I received from the work I am doing.* This is interesting. Paul doesn't think of a crown as some future reward he's going to get when he gets to heaven, as some religious people today see it. He did not seem to think God was going to someday say, "Paul, you did such a great job; I'm going to give you the Holy Land, United States, and Australia to reign over! Maybe I'll even include Europe. You can reign over all of this and sit on a throne of high position as the reward for the great work you have done."

For Paul, it was about the people. They were his crown and reward. He was privileged to be a part of seeing their changed lives, witnessing all they gained, and watching them grow in knowing God. And that's where I've ended up, too. I do internet, TV, and Radio shows, and I write commentaries like this one. I basically enjoy it, but it is sometimes laborious. But I do it because I want to. I'm not even looking for a reward now or in eternity (not that I've done anything to deserve one). But I guess if there is any *reward* in any of this, it is seeing people's lives change, even if it's only a few people and the changes are moderate. I get to be a very small part of something big that God is doing. And I believe that this is true of everyone. We all play a part – whatever part God has for us – in what he is doing. When even just one person comes to the point where they say, "Wow, the grace of God is so good. I can rest in that now; I can walk with God daily and enjoy real fellowship with him." This is what makes any effort on my part worthwhile. And so, Paul's readers were his joy and the crown that he received for the work he did in spreading the Good News.

Settle your disagreement (4:2)

Now, Paul has turned his attention to some people-problems. *I appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. Since you both belong to the Lord, please settle your disagreements.* A couple of ladies in the Philippian church were having trouble. This is a typical problem that comes up in any church or any group of people gathered together – a family, a business, or a political party. As soon as more than one person is present, there is a chance of trouble, usually some kind of disagreement.

This reminds me of the joke where a man is rescued from an island where he was stranded for several years. As he was flying away in the rescue helicopter, the pilot asked the man about something he couldn't help but notice.

"What are those three structures," asked the Pilot.

"Well, the first one is my house," responded the man. "And that second one is my church."

"What's that third structure," asked the pilot.

"Oh ... that's where I *used to* go to church!"

Even a man isolated on an island experienced a church split. We all find this humorous because that's just about how silly we all know we are.

So, these two ladies mentioned by Paul had some kind of disagreement. We've all seen this or have been a part of something like it. And, keep in mind, it is not just the ladies who experience this problem of division. Ladies can get a little snippy and sneaky, but guys tend to duke it out directly, usually verbally but sometimes physically. But this time, Paul is calling out the ladies. On other occasions, in his letters, it was the guys. Remember how Paul described in his letter to the Galatians an event where he called out Peter for his hypocrisy? In the book of Acts, Paul had a falling out with Barnabas over the fitness of John

Mark for ministry. They ended up parting and each taking another person with them as a co-worker. Paul was well-acquainted with division and disagreement. In this situation, he pleads with them and uses the fact that they are *fellow believers* to persuade them to reconcile and resolve their differences. Though Paul himself did not always take his own advice in the past, perhaps he learned a lot about what happens when fellow believers fail to reconcile. Sometimes what God allows us to go through (without stopping us) is a lesson we learn and will draw upon in the future. So never assume that what you are doing is right just because God does not stop you. It may be a *teaching moment* God brings us in his wisdom.

Paul continues his gentle pleading by appealing to someone he is partnering with in ministry to this Philippian church. *I ask you, my true partner, to help these two women, for they worked along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are written in the Book of Life.* This partner could be either Timothy or Epaphroditus, which were both referred to earlier in this letter. Or it could be someone else. Either way, he is asking for help in this matter, and it makes the point that, as mere humans, we usually cannot solve people's problems alone, if we ever can at all! Clement must have been fairly young when Paul wrote this letter because he was still alive as an older Christian in the early Second Century. He was part of the next generation of Christians after most of the original Apostles had died.

The book of life

Paul's *Book of Life* idea is something that also comes up in the Apocalypse of John (aka, the Book of Revelation), possibly written nearly half a century after Paul's writings. The phrase *Book*

of Life is used by Paul to indicate that there is (actually or figuratively) some kind of record that lists those who are believers and those who are lost. However, there is no indication that Paul understood this phrase in the same way as revelation uses it. Perhaps the writer of Revelation (depending on which *John* is assumed to be the author) got his idea from Paul's use of it here in his Philippian letter. But there is no way to know for sure, and we are wise not to speculate into some kind of dogmatic conclusion. But, clearly, this *Book of Life* was a very positive idea put forth by Paul, and it represents a way of identifying his trusted co-workers as those who know God and are in a good and active relationship with him.

I don't think God has an exclusive club where there is an *In Group* and an *Out Group*. For sure, there are those who know and walk with God and enjoy an active relationship with him. This kind of distinction is made throughout the New Testament. But to divide humanity into those who will go to heaven and those who will go to hell is quite another thing. Many Christians believe this, usually by those who are sure they're in the *In Group*, often condescending to those in the *Out Group* for not doing the one thing that is required to avoid eternal punishment by God ... belief! The problem with this is that it turns belief into a work that is required for salvation. This takes the saving work of Jesus out of the realm of grace, something that Paul clearly does not allow in his letter to the Ephesians (or in his other letters). But still, the New Testament makes some kind of distinction between two kinds of people.

However, I am convinced that this distinction does *not* divide humanity into two groups. Instead, it divides each human – every individual – as having a *new and old aspect* about them in this life. This is often referred to as the *flesh vs. Spirit, law vs. grace*, and the *new vs. old self*. Look into this and check it out; you will find it interesting and helpful in your understanding of who God is and how he saves his world through Jesus. This old person in the flesh

is resident in every individual, but God will do away with that part of us in eternity rather than divide all humanity into two groups, one to be saved and the other lost. It seems absurd that Jesus would come and only save some and not all who are lost. What kind of savior picks and chooses favorites from over eight billion who are desperately in need of salvation? If God required people to believe the right things, for the right reasons, with the right results, without ever falling back into unbelief is not really much of a saving work. It certainly is not salvation by grace, especially when those who need salvation are in greatest need to be saved from themselves, which they can't do! That's a lot of *works*, and it is far from grace.

Be full of joy (4:4)

Here's another memorable verse. *Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again, rejoice!* One popular translation says, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!" I think somebody made a chorus out of that verse. I remember singing it over and over at a church in my past. What a great, positive, uplifting, encouraging thing to tell someone, especially if there is good reason to rejoice and it's not just fabricated nonsense. Well, Paul had every reason to believe this to be true, and so rejoicing is something we can *always* do!

Paul continues. *Let everyone see that you are considerate in all that you do.* Okay, if it's possible, to the degree that you can be considerate in everything you do, let people see that. No, the fighting he just talked about above, along with many other things, does not qualify as considerate things. And here is Paul's reason: *Remember that the Lord is coming soon.* Wow, that's a good reason! Keep that perspective. The whole idea of Christ returning is the ultimate encouragement. We're all going to have

a new existence. All the sins will be gone. Eternal life will become everything God intended. If you keep this perspective, the problems in life get smaller instead of so big that you lose perspective and overreact. So, Paul says, “Keep in mind that the Lord is coming soon.”

But the problem is that he didn’t. That does not mean he will never come again; it just means that the New Testament writers, including Jesus, were mistaken as to when he would come. This is probably the biggest problem in the New Testament writings. Jesus, Paul, Peter, John, and the writer of Revelation all clearly stated that they expected the return of Jesus to happen within their lifetime – in the timeframe of the generation of people living in those days. Most of the writers of the New Testament expected Jesus to come back sooner rather than later, and that’s been a problem in church history ever since it failed to happen. The disappointment and the mocking came about slowly. Peter, in his second letter (assuming that Peter actually wrote it – and he could have), addressed this growing skepticism. His solution for the fact that Jesus had not yet come, after many years of church leaders and apostles telling people that it was “at hand,” was to say that “For God, 1000 years is like a day, and one day is like 1000 years.” Of course, this makes no sense and seems like a clever way to dismiss a very real and growing problem. However, it is possible that the author of Second Peter knew what he was talking about, and that God’s timing is not the same as ours. And for sure, that is always true, but it hardly explains why so many, including Jesus, got it wrong!

Some people, back then as well as today, have concluded that this was an inaccurate prediction on everyone’s part, which renders the New Testament fallible, causing some to seek some other faith or no faith at all. I do not think this is a required conclusion, but it’s not an unreasonable conclusion from a purely logical point of view. We are wise to consider what is logical, using the reasoning abilities that God has given us. So much in the New

Testament appeals to our sense of things not being contradictory and, therefore, must be at least basically reasonable. Otherwise, anything goes if anything can be explained away when it does not stand up to reasonable scrutiny! Christians appeal to reason and inconsistencies when they dismiss Buddha, Mohamad, Joseph Smith (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Edgar Casey, Elen G White (seventh Day Adventist), and even other Christian denominations when they do not comply with some creed or doctrinal statement drafted by humans down through church history. So why the double standard? Why not scrutinize our own faith as much as we do others? Isn't this the best way to discover the truth, according to Paul who said to "test everything carefully." What are people afraid of? I think we are all more afraid of *having to change* what we believe than we are *finding out we're wrong*. It seems like a bad trade to me and something I have never been willing to do.

So, I look at *all* the facts I can get my hands on, many of which I was never told about at church or seminary, and I follow them wherever they lead. God is in the business of truth, not indoctrination. He, of all beings in the universe, wants all the facts to come out, be what they are, and let them have the effect on people's minds and hearts as needed. Still, each person must decide what to believe and why. That is everyone's God-given right and something that we all must live and die with.

What kind of coming?

The whole idea of Christ coming back is that we're all going to make it. We'll all have new bodies, renewed minds, and a new and better existence. All the sins will be gone. It'll be everything God intended life to be, though it was not possible in this life because he allowed us to freely choose, which introduced sin into the world. God knew this would happen before he created the world and allowed such a disaster. Yet it really was not a disaster

at all. He had a plan – one he made in eternity past. To us, it was a mysterious plan but a good one. It was a *Mysterious Plan Revealed*, which is the title of my commentary on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. There Paul spells out what God's plan was and how it played out in the person of Jesus to save this fallen world. If we gain and keep this perspective, our problems become smaller in light of who God is, what he has done for us, and the wonderful future he has in store. Otherwise, we can get lost in the minutia where we overreact to almost everything. So, Paul wants them to remember that "the Lord is coming soon!"

The fact that all the New Testament writers, and even Jesus, were mistaken about *when* Christ would return does not mean that he can't or won't. It just means that they were in error, or that something is going on in how God works that we can't understand. Perhaps his coming is more spiritual than physical. Maybe his second coming is when he shows up to usher each person home at the time of their death. Then, again, some people believe his "coming on the clouds" is when he ascended to the Father, as recorded in the book of Acts. They draw this conclusion because the idea of "coming on the clouds" was taken from the book of Daniel, where the Son of Man is seen ascending to the Ancient of Days (obviously God) and described as him "coming" to God on the clouds! This is a reasonable conclusion but not conclusively air-tight.

The Bible is full of conundrums like this that don't add up and leave people wondering. Many try to force an interpretation, but they are just *speculating with gusto*! So, we are wise to let the details be what they are and seek a big perspective of God based on all we know and experience as we seek him and watch him work in our lives. For me, all these detailed problems in the Bible and all the apparent contradictions in life have driven me to see God as much greater, higher, more excellent, and perfect than I ever imagined. He alone is perfect, and all other people, writings, speculations, and claims are flawed to some degree, not to be

blindly trusted. For me, God himself must be my final authority ... not my parents, pastor, institutionalized church, set of ancient writings, or even the Gospel accounts of Jesus that were written anonymously some forty years after his death and resurrection. All such things are tainted in some way, and only by knowing God, seeking him, and listening to him (which sometimes can include books and other people) – only God can I ultimately trust and believe him to show me everything I need to know in due time. Many things, though, will have to wait until eternity because we cannot possibly learn and understand everything fully in this life!

Jesus said, “There are some standing here who won't taste death until they see me coming in glory with my angels.” Well, that clearly did not happen in the most literal sense, taking his statement at face value (which should always be our starting point when considering anything in the New Testament.) Was Jesus mistaken? Was he limited in his knowledge as he said he was concerning the “hour and day” of his coming? I don't know. But it is ok if he was. Jesus was at least human, and to what degree he was more than that has been debated and speculated in detail since his departure. Was he speaking figuratively? Perhaps. He did this a lot. All his parables were figurative of other, more important realities in life. Did somebody monkey with the text and make Jesus say things he didn't say? We know with certainty that the copies we now have of the New Testament have been changed in different places because they vary from each other in specific content. This does not make the New Testament worthless, but it does make it something to accept with a degree of caution, always turning to God for ultimate answers.

These things are all problems. But we are always invited into God's presence to commune with him. Never let anyone take this privilege from you and replace it with claims, sermons, creeds, doctrinal statements, dogmas, and writings. All of these are far inferior to “knowing Christ and him crucified,” so says Paul. We

can know God, talk with him, and him to us in the solitude of our hearts. We can ask him questions, and he is fully able to give us answers that might come in the form of writing, other people, life experiences, or quiet meditation and prayer. Never despise any of this, even though there are those out there who want you to be totally dependent on them as *experts*. Any honest friend or pastor will encourage you to seek God in the most direct and sincere way.

And so, Paul wants his readers to rejoice and keep on rejoicing simply because they (as we do) have so much to be joyful about. Despite any problems, contradictions, flawed writings, and people, we can fully trust the God who is there, created us, loves us, will never abandon us, and will safely bring us home to himself when our appointed day comes!

The peace of God (4:6)

Paul starts another memorable passage in this way, *Don't worry about anything*. The great, twentieth-century theologian, Bob Marley, sang these words in what was probably his most famous song, "Don't you worry, worry about a thing. Cause every little thing, it's gonna be alright." Now maybe he got this idea from Paul here in Philippians Four. But he did not need to. Anyone who understands two of the most obvious things that must be true about God are (1) the *greatness* of God and (2) the *goodness* of God. Putting these two ideas together, which anyone can do based on their intuitive view of God, results in a view of life held by Bob Marley, the Apostle Paul, and many others.

Paul goes on and adds, *Instead, pray about everything*. So, don't worry about anything, and pray about everything. I like that. There is nothing to worry about, although we may have legitimate concerns; there is everything to pray about, which has a lot to do with not worrying. Replacing worry with prayer is almost magical.

There is something about getting alone with God and pouring out your heart, your joys, your fears, your aspirations, and your confessions that do more for your soul than anything else. I'm not talking about the public prayers that are offered in a church service, some of which seem to be sermons and doctrinal statements in disguise. But these are certainly included in legitimate prayers. There is a time and place for people to gather together, pray together, praise God, and make their requests known. But there is something very special about praying in the quiet of your own heart with no one watching that you can impress or appease by a show of how spiritual you are.

Jesus recommended this as the best way to pray. He said, "When you pray, go into your closet, shut the door, and pray to your Father in secret." He knew that the *real* business of prayer gets done in solitude. But keep in mind that real prayer is not like a magic wand or a genie in a bottle. It is much better than such superficial things, delightful as they may appear to be. It is true fellowship with God, just you and him. There is really nothing better in life, nothing more meaningful and intimate. You are alone with your Creator, who loves you, loves to be with you, and always wants the very best for you. What experience in life could be richer than this?

When we are in prayer, and even after we emerge back into this crazy troubled world, we can quit worrying because nothing can ever happen where God is not involved and has some good purpose for us and others. Because of our prayer, we need not worry about things changing. Things may change in what we believe to be our favor, or they may not. Either way, it's okay. Things may change in some mysterious way, and that is okay, too. But the most important thing that prayer will change is us! We need to change, and God knows it. There is no better way to bring this about than spending time alone with God. It is golden. Often prayer is for us, our sanity, and our peace of mind. Talking with God, communicating with him, and letting him know how we feel

is key. He wants to hear from us. He delights in it. No fancy words are needed. Just share your heart and mind with him. This is why Paul tells his readers, “Don't worry about anything and pray about everything.”

Tell God what you need. Go on, go ahead. You're not gonna hurt anything. God may give it to you, and he might not. And if he doesn't give you what you ask for, it's because it's not the best thing for you. God watches out for us, even against our own requests and wills. So, we can conclude, “God said *no*, and that's good enough for me. He always answers us, and it will be either yes, no, or wait. Tell God what you need, says Paul. Then he adds, *And thank him for all he has done.* Ah-ha! I knew there was a catch. But it's a good *catch*. If when we ask God for things (and it's okay that we do) and then also thank him for all he has done in the past as a reminder to ourselves that he is faithful and will always do the best thing, then (and maybe only then) can we rest in whatever happens. There is no better way to pray. We need only to ask God for things and thank him at the same time. Paul would probably say that it is important to do these two things together. If we just ask God for stuff and say, “God, I want this. I don't like that, and please go change things for me,” we are missing out on all that prayer can be and should be. We are doing half the job, and we are getting half the result. We can start telling God, “Those other people are not living like me, the way I think they should,” and it all gets very self-centered. But when we ask God for things and combine it with thanking him for everything, our prayer is changed, and we are changed. We need only to ask with a different attitude and a different heart.

Paul then tells his readers what will come out of praying in this way. *Then you'll experience the peace of God, which exceeds anything we can understand.* These two things (asking and

thanking) go together really well. Then, after you tell God what you need and thank him for what he has already done, then you will experience the *peace of God*. This is how it comes – by having this kind of attitude in your heart, this kind of disposition toward him, one of thankfulness when you talk with him, letting him know what you need and not worrying about anything.

Yes, his peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. Think about that. We can get peace from God, and we will get it by communicating with him, thanking him, and letting him know what we need. Then comes a kind of peace and calmness that is beyond our understanding. And this peace will guard our hearts and our minds as we live in Christ. Consistently, throughout all of Paul's letters, his bottom line is that all we get from God and gain in life comes about as a result of our choosing to "live in Christ." Jesus is always at the center of everything. He, as a real person (not a book, or an institution, or some other respected person), is the only one who can make our lives right.

We have all kinds of feelings. Sometimes they plague us. Do you experience this sometimes? I sure do! They can be feelings of anger, fear, guilt, insecurity, jealousy, or wanting things we do not possess. They can also be elation, hope, and joy. We can have all kinds of good and bad feelings, but it is the *peace of God* that will guard our hearts, no matter how we feel. It's the peace of God that passes understanding that guards our minds and our hearts as we live in Christ – not in going to church, not in reading the Bible, not at seminary, not even in doing good works. These are all good things in and of themselves. The peace of God may include some of these things, but peace is not in any way *dependent* on them. The peace you get from God is from him alone, even when he uses and includes other things to bring it about. The bottom line for Paul, and it should be for us, is that we live in Christ, and he lives in us through his Spirit.

17. Dwell on Good Things (Philippians 4:8-23)

The God of peace (4:8)

And now, after Paul tells his readers about the *peace of God*, he turns their attention to the *God of peace*. This is yet another memorable passage. *And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your mind on what is true and honorable, right and pure, lovely and admirable. One final thing from Paul? Oh, sure. He's always got one more thing to add. But they are always good additions, and his letter must end at some point. We do well to figure that Paul probably has several final things to say. But this is a good list of great things to fix our minds on. It's all about positive and encouraging things, we need this, and we need to dwell on such things. Over the years, I have lost count of how many people, usually Christians, have put down a popular idea like, "The power of positive thinking." I understand their concern that one who does this might not view life realistically. However, notice that this slogan and Paul's list do not tell anyone to ignore bad things in life and pretend they don't exist. No one does this unless they have some kind of mental illness or incapacity. We are all very aware of all the negative and horrible things in this world. We see them, or the result of them, every day. The question is, what should we do about it? Or better, what*

can we do about it? Frankly, not much. But we can, very much, control how we will respond, not just in actions that are limited, but in our thinking. And this is, perhaps, where the real battle is fought and won.

Dwelling on good things is not foolish. In fact, dwelling on bad things is foolish, yet we all so easily slip into this. It takes no effort at all and accomplishes nothing except to further disable us in our minds and hearts. There are so many good things in life, but only a few bad things can paint our whole view. It only takes a drop of ink to turn a clear glass of water murky. Yet, one drop of clear water into a glass of ink will not even be noticed. We are influenced by negative things more than positive. This is why (unfortunately) negative campaigning is so effective and powerful. Those who avoid it, noble as that is, usually lose an election. One negative suggestion without any evidence whatsoever can taint, sometimes ruin, the reputation of a good person.

We are wise to dwell on good things like: true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and admirable things. We know what kinds of things these are. Definitions are not even needed, and when taken together as complementary brush strokes on a painting, the picture of what is good cannot be mistaken. Good things go far beyond just *religious truths*. Truly good things are large in scope, and they are all worthy of Paul's list, in which he only mentions a few items and only in general terms. Good things are true, accurate, and honorable – not the crazy, goofy stuff. Dishonorable things are out there, too, and in many ways, help to define what good really is! Right as opposed to wrong, pure as opposed to dirty, lovely as opposed to disgusting. Dwelling on good things is not stupid; it's not foolish or a waste of time. It always brings us into a better place to live.

Paul then gives a quick summary of his list of six good things to dwell on. *Think about things that are excellent and worthy*

of praise. Excellent and worthy are great words to describe what is good. These words can even provide a quick test to see if what we are dwelling on is good. Ask yourself, “Are these thoughts and ideas I have excellent? Are they worthy of praise? Would anyone ever conclude that these are good thoughts and ideas rattling around in my head?”

How about dwelling on the past? Do you dwell on good or bad things from your past? Do you dwell on how bad you've been and all the mistakes you have made? For sure, these should not be ignored, but confess them, deal with them, learn from them, and then throw them away, and do not rehearse them over and over in your mind. This is the kind of destructive thing that Paul is warning about. How about your doubts about God and life and what somebody did to you twenty years ago? Do you dwell on these kinds of unworthy things that are void of excellence? See how easy it is to run Paul's quick test for what is good? If you dwell on and think about these negative things, you're going to end up in a different place than if you dwell on the good all around you that occurs abundantly in life.

Now, if you only depend on positive thinking, aside from God, knowing him, and living in Christ, it will not work very well, nor will it last very long. You can try, and many people do, but it is usually short-lived. However, the principle is a good one whether God is involved or not. People who dwell on positive things, even without including that God is always good, still have much to gain and are better off. Good ideas and principles are not just good because God gives them; they are good because they work, and that's why God gives them to us. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam are all full of good and positive principles on how to live and help others. Truth and good ideas are not exclusive to Jesus and his apostles. Good things, good living, honoring God, and loving others were all practiced by many people long before Christianity came on the scene. But for me, Jesus and the writers of the New Testament (who were followers

of him) are my best source of good information about who God is, who we are, and how we should live. If we dwell on positive things, good things, honorable things, right things, pure things, and admirable things – things that are excellent and worthy of praise – it's because we know God, we know that he knows what he's doing, and we can fully trust him.

Paul continues and writes, *Keep putting into practice all you've learned and received from me – everything you've heard from me and have seen me doing. Then, the God of peace will be with you.* Paul plays a little with the words between this passage and the previous one. Above, he wrote that if his readers trust God, pray, and thank him for everything, then the *peace of God* will be with them and will guard their hearts. In this passage, Paul says if they practice what he has taught them, then the *God of peace* will be with them. (Thus, the title of this commentary, *The Peace of God from the God of Peace*.) When we have peace that comes from God, it means we know the God who is the source of that peace. Almost everyone seeks peace in their lives. Peace is the absence of chaos, and it is experiencing calm physically, mentally, and spiritually. It is that overwhelming sense that all is well, and we can rest in it, knowing God is the one who brings it.

I can do everything through Christ (4:10)

Now Paul starts a new subject, and this passage contains yet another memorable passage. *I praise the Lord that you are concerned about me again; I know you've always been concerned about me, but you didn't have the chance to help me. However, I was never really in need for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.* Paul appreciates their concern, and he recognizes that they would have helped him if they could.

Many times, we want to help other people, but we can't. We may be limited physically, financially, or by distance. Paul had been through plenty of trouble on his missionary journeys throughout the Eastern Mediterranean region. He seldom got any help. He usually just had to plow through, endure hardships, and never give up taking the Good News message about Jesus to the world around him. He learned how to get along without much in resources, finances, and help from others. However, this did not stop him. He almost died a couple of times but was more than willing to die for the cause of Christ and the reality of his resurrection. In fact, he had become so accustomed to getting by on nearly nothing that he considered his situation as one without need. More importantly, he knew he lived his life in Christ, which left him without any needs since God always supplied everything he needed, enabling him to minister successfully to the Gentiles (non-Jews).

Paul further explains. *I know how to live on almost nothing, but also how to live with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.* Strength comes from Christ, not himself. This is the key. How many current-day politicians, religious leaders, including great historical figures believed their strength was in themselves? Well, in some ways, they were right. The little strength and ability they possess to put on a good show, and sometimes even bullying people, comes from themselves. But it is a relatively puny power that is more illusion than substance. Most of them are failures in their personal lives; that is where real strength is needed. Having the *gift of gab* and exercising great influence over a crowd of people is not all that impressive. But, in comparison, a person who lives a quiet life and accomplishes a great deal simply because they trust God

and rely on Christ for strength is truly impressive. Besides, any politician or pastor can only accomplish what little he does because God has granted him good health and opportunities that opened doors. But it is always to accomplish God's greater purpose.

We can choose to endure life if we want, and sometimes we do. But we are lucky to break even in our personal lives and accomplish just about as much as failure, always chased around by life itself. Have you ever lived like this? Most of us have, and usually when we are in our younger years. I am always surprised to encounter older people who still live like this, seem to have learned very little in life, and have no clue about how to depend on God and draw strength from Christ.

The strength that comes from knowing Jesus and having a relationship with him is delightful and essential once we experience all the advantages of living in him. In the middle of the night, and nobody's there to be impressed with how you're doing, feeling, living, and thinking, to know that God is present is as good as it gets in life. Sometimes, we lay there, not feeling good due to illness, heartache, or old age, yet we know God is there, and we experience the *peace that passes understanding*. It is the *peace of God from the God of peace*, then concerns and worries about life find a much smaller place in our minds because of the strength we gain in Christ. This is what Paul means when he writes, "I can do (endure, accomplish, work through) all things in Christ who gives me strength." He knew that this kind of strength resulted in real success that could never be found in himself. It is good to be aware of our strengths and abilities, all of which came from God, but it's even more important to know our limits and blind spots.

I don't think it's a magical thing. There might be some kind of spiritual action God takes that affects how we feel; in that way, God brings us strength. But more likely, when we focus on God and choose to live in Christ, we can change because our new and correct perspective frees us up from wrong thinking, which so

limits us and sometimes leads us astray. When we trust God and live in Christ, we think about things that are right, good, pure, and honorable – all the good things Paul had on his list of what we should dwell on. If you put your trust in God and live in a way that honors him, that's the secret of every situation, whether we have plenty to eat or a little, many possessions or few. It really does not matter in this grand scheme perspective of life where all other things fall into their proper place.

But it's still not easy

We can experience, accomplish, and endure anything and everything through Christ, who gives us strength. However, this does not mean that life is always rosy as a result. It just means we can live a successful and satisfying life, despite all the changes because our ultimate strength is not our own. We can almost feel it propping us up in the worst times. When I was younger, I had a family member who went through a prolonged, chronic, debilitating illness. It was extremely difficult and discouraging, especially in young adulthood and marriage, when life was supposed to be reasonable, manageable, and not all that bad because God was front and center. Franky, after many years of enduring, I bottomed out. I did not go off the deep end or do foolish things, but the discouragement was overwhelming for me as a Christian who had not lived all that many years and still had so much to learn about walking through life with God. But a funny thing happened, something unexpected that I had never imagined. Down there at the emotional and spiritual bottom, when I had exhausted all my resources and was exhausted by life, I landed on something solid that was clearly not me. It was God, plain and simple, and I could never have discovered this any other way. It changed my life because it demonstrated that the bottom line was that God was there, he held me up in the worst of times, and it wasn't me! No better lesson in life could have been learned,

and as God rebuilt me on my way back up – I ended up a different and better man. Please understand that I would (even to this day) never sign up for such a learning program, but God, in his strength, signed me up for it; he did not ask me; he just did what was best for me, even though I had to endure through it before I discovered the beauty of what God was doing in my life. This was how I learned what Paul was talking about when he wrote, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength!”

I know that God will always be there with me through all the aches, pains, and difficulties. I’ll never be alone. God is with us in ways that our wives, husbands, kids, friends, or any other human beings can ever be. God’s kind of *presence* is special. Though we cannot see, hear, or feel him with our five senses, for those who know him, he is all the more real and undeniable. He is beyond our mere human senses and, in a strange way, not limited by them as all other experiences in life are. God is with us in a way that nobody else can be, and it’s amazing, it’s marvelous. It’s the peace that passes understanding!

However, sometimes it feels that it comes and goes, that sometimes God seems distant. He is not, but that is how we genuinely feel. When this happens, he is not the one that moved or changed ... we have. But he stays and helps us work through it, and we end up with an even better and closer relationship with God. Sometimes I must remind myself that God is there, even though I don’t feel like it. Maybe you’ve been through some of this. Well, David, writer of the Psalms, went through this plenty! He would cry out, “Where are you, God? I’m not feeling your presence. Don’t abandon me.” But we can know that God is present, even though we don’t feel it, because of our past experiences with him. This is usually how David solved his insecurity problems, by counting the many times in the past when God was clearly there for him. We are wise to do the same.

Sometimes God lets us experience difficult things, knowing that it’s all going to come around, we’re going to be back in

fellowship with him, and it's gonna all be made, right? Remember, Paul and Bob Marley both declared that we need not worry about anything! Sometimes, there is a contrast between feeling like God's not there and finding that he actually is. It's so euphoric. There is no greater contrast or realization. Perhaps this is why God allows this contrast, knowing we will grow in our knowledge of him. It's wonderful. It's amazing. But sometimes we have to wait for it. But in the end, we learn what Paul learned, "the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little," because we find our strength in God through Christ.

God will supply all your needs (4:14)

Paul's just about to wrap things up in his letter, but he's got a couple more things to say. *You have done well in sharing my present difficulty. You, Philippians, were the only ones who helped me financially when I first traveled from Macedonia to bring you the Good News. No other church did this for me.* Looks like Paul needed travel money. Traveling was expensive then, just as it is today. He had to get on a boat or travel by road. No one quickly got anywhere in the ancient world, so food and accommodation were needed. This church supported him in that way. Though Paul was a one-man show in many ways, he could not do what he did without help from someone. God made life this way. None of us accomplish anything alone. We might do it mostly alone, but we always need some help from others, and we need to help others, too.

Even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help more than once. I'm not saying this because I want a gift from you. Instead, I want you to receive a reward for your kindness. Paul was not in ministry for the money. It was lousy,

at best. I'm sure he made much more and lived much better as a Pharisee. But he does appreciate it when people help him. Remember, no one can make it on their own. We all need help from someone, even if it is minimal. His focus was not on what *he* could get out of their generosity. Instead, he wanted them to realize how much *they* would gain by giving. Paul clearly teaches the whole idea of supporting people in ministry. It's all good. Nothing wrong with any of that. But there is another side to it: what the giver gets out of giving.

In fact, he refers to what they gain as a *reward*. He probably had in mind the kind of reward (crown) that they were to him because of his work in their lives. Their changed lives were Paul's *reward*, and Paul's working with them was their reward for supporting him. It's a two-way street, a full-circle benefit. This is how God has made it. We all need each other, even though we completely depend on God. Paul wants them to gain their reward for their kindness in helping him take the gospel out into the world.

At the moment, I have all I need and more. I'm fully supported by the gifts you sent to me through Epaphroditus. To me, this is like a sweet-smelling sacrifice that is acceptable and pleasing to God. Again, Paul claims to not have any need, in light of all that Christ means to him and fulfills him completely. Yet, he appreciates the ways in which they have supported him. I'm not sure he could handle this dilemma any other way. On one hand, we are complete in Christ and need nothing more. Yet, we all need help from others, which builds a sense of community and unity that we long for. So, both are true, perhaps just in different ways.

I don't think it was literally a "sweet-smelling sacrifice" since the animal sacrifices that were practiced by the Jews were messy, smelly, gross, and ugly. Personally, I find this whole idea of violence toward animals to be rather disgusting. But I stay

flexible, not desiring to speak for God or criticize what he requires or allows in his infinite wisdom. But one honest question I have is whether God was the one who originated this crude practice or if the Jews, in their zeal to appease God, came up with it, and God went along knowing he would someday bring correction in the form of his son, Jesus. Either way, sacrifices are what Jews did as part of their worship, and Paul is referring to it as a positive thing, comparing it to the good thing they were doing to support him.

And this same God, who takes care of me, will supply all your needs out of his glorious riches which are given to us in Christ Jesus. This is another memorable passage. Here Paul is encouraging his readers by telling them that God will take care of them just as they have seen God take care of Paul, sometimes in rather miraculous ways. And notice that Paul always refers to Christ as God's source of all good and provision. It is *in Christ* that all the glorious riches of God are bestowed upon them ... and, therefore, upon us today! It's always about Jesus. Remember, at the beginning of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he repeatedly claims that "All the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places have been given to us *in Christ*," not in the Bible, not in going to church, not in helping others (though these are all good things and might be part of God's blessing to us). But only in Christ, nowhere else are God's spiritual blessings found. Once we understand that God's riches, which supply all our needs, are always in Christ. These are the riches of knowing him and him knowing us; we've got it made. We're home free. There's no higher or better place to go. It always comes down to each one of us and God. When all of us reach the point where we're going to die, whether we're conscious or not, it will be just you and God, even though other people might be present. He will be the one *truly* with you, by your side, holding your hand (spiritually). He will be in you, and you in him; you will somehow feel his presence, which will be

marvelous. It will be a marvelous experience, difficult as it may be physically. And this is true in every situation in life. We go through things, but to know God is there and holding our hands, so to speak, we can rest assured that all will be well. How could it not be, and God still be God?

Sometimes in life, we plead with God, "Get me out of this!" But he answers, "I don't want you out of this. I want you to learn. It's for your good because I love you, and your relationship with me will grow. You will gain a great deal of good from this, and it will all end up better than if you never went through this at all." That is a tough reality for any of us to accept because we usually do not see the good that will come out of our difficulties while we are in them. We can only trust God *in* them ... or not. Either way, God will do what is right and best; someday, we will see it and thank him for it. He knows this, stays faithful to us in our worst times, and brings about his best for us because he loves us!

I've been through things where I ask, "God, what is this all about? I'm not getting it. This is not getting me anywhere. I hate it. I don't want to be in this situation. I wish I could somehow avoid it." Even Jesus said, with great anxiety, "Father, I don't want to go through this upcoming death on a cross. Is there any way I can avoid it? Yet, I want your will to be done in my life, so I will trust you in this." So, if Jesus can struggle in the face of difficulty, so can we. But the bottom line must always be, "Lord, your will be done!" In that, we can find peace because God's always there, and he will never leave us.

Final greetings (4:20)

All glory to God our Father, forever and ever. Amen! You'd think Paul was finished with his letter. But he's not. He's got one more thing to say ... a final greeting.

Give my greetings to each of God's holy people – all who belong to Christ Jesus. The fellow believers who are with me send their greetings. The rest of God's people also send you greetings, especially those in Caesar's household. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Several times in my commentaries, I remark about Paul's use of the word *may*. It can easily sound like he's saying, "Well, maybe God will give you his grace, and maybe he won't." But I think he's saying, "May it happen that you will *experience* the grace that always comes from God and is always there." Any sense of grace being lost is on our end as the receivers. We can shun it, ignore it, or reject it. But it is still there. It's always there. God never pulls his grace away from us. And when we change our mind (that is what the word repent means), we will experience his grace once again and discover that it was there at the time!

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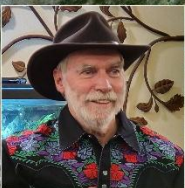
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