

Books in the PREACHING THE WORD Series:

GENESIS

Beginning and Blessing

EXODUS

Saved for God's Glory  
by Philip Graham Ryken

NUMBERS

God's Presence in the Wilderness  
by Iain M. Duguid

ISAIAH

God Saves Sinners  
by Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr.

JEREMIAH AND LAMENTATIONS

From Sorrow to Hope  
by Philip Graham Ryken

DANIEL

The Triumph of God's Kingdom  
by Rodney D. Stortz

MARK, 2 VOLS

Jesus, Servant and Savior

LUKE, 2 VOLS

That You May Know the Truth

JOHN

That You May Believe

ACTS

The Church Afire

ROMANS

Righteousness from Heaven

2 CORINTHIANS

Power in Weakness

EPHESIANS

The Mystery of the Body of Christ

COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

The Supremacy of Christ

1 & 2 TIMOTHY AND TITUS

To Guard the Deposit  
by R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell

HEBREWS, 2 VOLS

An Anchor for the Soul

JAMES

Faith That Works

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Message of the Kingdom

Unless otherwise indicated, all volumes are by R. Kent Hughes

P R E A C H I N G   T H E   W O R D

# PHILIPPIANS

The Fellowship of the Gospel

*R. Kent Hughes*

*R. Kent Hughes, General Editor*

CROSSWAY BOOKS  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Philippians*

Copyright © 2007 by R. Kent Hughes

Published by Crossway Books  
a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers  
1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Cover banner by Marge Gieser

Art Direction: Josh Dennis

First printing, 2007

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scriptures indicated as from the NIV are taken from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved. The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society. Use of either trademark requires the permission of International Bible Society.

Scripture quotations indicated as from the KJV are from the *The Holy Bible: The King James Version*.

---

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Hughes, R. Kent

Philippians : the fellowship of the Gospel / R. Kent Hughes.

p. cm. — (Preaching the word)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-58134-954-2 (hc)

I. Bible. N.T. Philippians—Commentaries. I. Title. II. Series.

BS2705.53.H84 2007

227.607—dc22

2007020763

---

TS	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	09	08	07				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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

PHILIPPIANS 1:1, 2

# A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

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

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

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

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

The second element in knowing God's smile in preaching is *ethos* — what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the

truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

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

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

*R. Kent Hughes*  
*Wheaton, Illinois*

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:1, 2)*

# 1

## A Particular Joy

PHILIPPIANS 1:1, 2

**T**his is admittedly subjective, but it seems to me that the four chapters of Philippians have provided more favorite quotes and sound bites than any other section of Scripture of similar length — certainly it has done that for me. Here are some of my favorites:

- “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (1:21)
- “I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.” (1:23)
- “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” (1:27)
- “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also the interests of others.” (2:3, 4)
- “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (2:5-10)
- “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (2:12, 13)
- “. . . that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ.” (3:8, 9)

- “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (3:13, 14)

- “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (3:20)

- “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” (4:4)

- “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4:6, 7)

- “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable . . .” (4:8)

- “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” (4:11)

- “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (4:13)

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

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

### ***PAUL’S JOURNEY TO PHILIPPI***

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

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

the gateway to Europe. There Dr. Luke joined them, forming a dynamic foursome.

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

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

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

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

**PAUL'S RECEPTION IN PHILIPPI**

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

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

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

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

It is important to understand here that the church in Philippi would become Paul's favorite church.<sup>7</sup> Paul enjoyed a unique closeness to the Philippians, which we see in exceptionally warm and friendly expressions in this letter. Paul makes this clear right after his greeting as he says, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine

for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (vv. 3-5). The word “partnership” is the Greek word *koinonia*, “fellowship” — Paul feels a warm “fellowship in the gospel” with the Philippians. As we will see in our next study, the same word (fellowship, partnership) or its derivatives appears six times in Philippians (cf. 1:5, 7; 2:1; 3:10; 4:14, 15 [twice]). And we shall see that this is not a church social fellowship as Christians today often think of the word, but a robust fellowship that rides on their mutual commitment to the gospel. This gospel fellowship grew from their commitment to support Paul’s mission spiritually and materially (cf. 4:15, 16).

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

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

### ***PAUL’S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS (vv. 1, 2)***

The occasion for Paul’s letter to the Philippians came years after the founding of the church and sprang from their financial support of him as a prisoner in Rome (cf. 4:18). Their monetary gift had been carried to him by a church member named Epaphroditus who had nearly died during its delivery (cf. 2:27). And when Epaphroditus recovered and prepared to return, Paul asked him to carry the letter home. So the letter arrived late in Paul’s imprisonment, after A.D. 60 and probably after A.D. 62.<sup>8</sup>

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

The very words of Paul’s greeting evoke his attitude of partnership with the Philippians as he tailors his greeting for the occasion. Most noticeably he omits the use of the title “apostle” and begins, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.” The disuse of his title evidences the familiar warmth that existed between him and the Philippian believers.<sup>10</sup> And his inclusion of Timothy as coauthor indicates that Paul would share his authority with those in the “partnership [fellowship] of the gospel.” As Karl Barth put it, “A hero, a genius, a ‘religious personality’ stands alone; an apostle

has others beside him like himself and sets them on his own level.”<sup>11</sup> Even more, Paul identifies himself and Timothy as “servants [literal translation, “slaves”] of Christ Jesus” — a term that in its Philippian/Roman context carried negative connotations that were just as repugnant to the fashionable middle class of the first century as today.<sup>12</sup> Paul knew exactly what he was saying because the only other use of “slave” in this letter will come in 2:7, used of Christ who “took the form of a *slave*.”

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

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

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

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

- 1:4b: “making my prayer with joy.”
- 1:18b: “Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.”
- 1:25b: “your . . . joy in the faith.”
- 2:2: “complete my joy,”
- 2:17, 18: “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”

- 2:28: “that you may rejoice.”
- 2:29: “so receive him in the Lord with all joy.”
- 3:1: “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.”
- 4:4: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”
- 4:10: “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly.”

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

*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (1:3-6)*

## 2

# Paul's Joyous Thanksgiving

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### ***THANKFUL REMEMBRANCE* (vv. 3, 4)**

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

The Apostle Paul is frankly astonishing in this respect. On an earlier occasion when he had not yet been to Rome but was writing his conclusion to his famous epistle to the Romans, he listed no less than thirty-three names in his concluding greetings (Romans 16). Most of those people he had met on his journeys through Asia and Asia Minor and had subsequently taken up residence in Rome. The great theologian was a people person first and foremost. Imagine the heart and the energy that went into such ministry. Paul was always inquiring and making note of his people’s whereabouts and condition and was thanking God in all his remembrance of them.

*Joyful prayer.* And the outcome was not only thankfulness to God but joyous petition — “always in every prayer of mine for you all making my

prayer with joy” (v. 4). This was an intensely emotional matter for Paul as the inclusive words “always,” “every,” and “all” convey.<sup>4</sup> When he thought of their names, he automatically prayed for them — and that included *all* of them, not just a favored few. But what is most noteworthy is that here in verse 4 Paul begins to sound the note of joy that rings fifteen more times in this letter as it builds to its ringing crescendo in chapter 4: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (v. 4).

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

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

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

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

The source of joy is outside itself. It is “in the Lord” (cf. 2:29; 3:1; 4:4, 10). It can be commanded because they are “in the Lord” who gives it.<sup>6</sup> What Paul does with this early joy note and its fifteen echoes is to assure his close friends who are so burdened about his imprisonment that being in prison has not robbed him of his joy. Paul consciously models the joy that he will command the Philippians to have.<sup>7</sup> What a standard Paul’s remembrance from his jail sets as it evokes thanksgiving and prayer and joy in his soul. What a call to those of us charged with the care of souls to remember all our people always with thanksgiving and joyful prayer.

### **THANKFUL FOR FELLOWSHIP (v. 5)**

Paul’s thankful, backward look was based on the long-standing reality of the Philippians’ “partnership [fellowship] in the gospel from the first day

until now” (v. 5), which is the center of verses 3-6.<sup>8</sup> As we have mentioned, the depth of the fellowship that Paul celebrated here exceeds that of any earthly fellowship. The great reason for this is that there was, as Gordon Fee says, a “three-way bond” between Paul, the Philippians, and Christ.<sup>9</sup> This provided the spiritual glue of their fellowship. Even more, it infused their fellowship in the gospel with the “other-person-centeredness” that exists between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit — the full and perfect fellowship within the Trinity.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere the Apostle John writes, “and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). Thus the fact that they were in Christ provided their fellowship with a cohesion and others-directedness that focused them away from self-interest toward the interests of the fellowship (cf. Philippians 2:4).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What do I mean? Fellowship over coffee after a church service is good, but it is not Christian fellowship. It is fellowship among Christians, but not the fellowship that Paul celebrated. Don't misunderstand — having coffee and meals together is one of our great pleasures. I love a cup of coffee with friends. I will eat anything and all that is placed in front of me, relishing it all the more in the company of good friends and conversation!

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

**THANKFUL CONFIDENCE (v. 6)**

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

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

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

Paul's confidence was in the "Godness of God."<sup>12</sup> Moisés Silva writes, "Theologians who speak of salvation as being God's from beginning to end are not using mere rhetoric, for this is precisely Paul's conception as he addresses the Philippians regarding their share in the gospel."<sup>13</sup> Everything is from God!

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

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

The Apostle Paul looked through the bars of his confinement and

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

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

Joy pealed from that prison cell in Rome.

# Notes

## CHAPTER ONE: A PARTICULAR JOY

1. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 24.
2. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 3.
3. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 4.
4. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 4.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
7. Thielman, *Philippians*, p. 18.
8. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 32.
9. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 38.
10. Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992, 2005), p. 39.
11. Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 9.
12. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 50.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

## CHAPTER TWO: PAUL'S JOYOUS THANKSGIVING

1. Tony Payne, ed., *D. Broughton Knox, Selected Works*, Vol. 1 (New South Wales, Australia: Matthias Media, 2000), p. 58.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 80.
4. Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992, 2005), p. 42, writes:

It is the intensity of Paul's emotion that accounts for the syntax; it also accounts for the fourfold recurrence of *pas* (in the forms *pase* [two times], *pan tote*, and *pan ton*), for the apparent emphasis on joy (*meta charas*), and for the forcefulness of subsequent expressions (from the first day; being persuaded).
5. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 59.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 38.
8. Silva, *Philippians*, p. 43, writes:

Meyer perceptively emphasizes that the constancy of the Philippians' commitment to the gospel "is the very thing which not only supplies the motive for the apostle's thankfulness, but forms also the ground of his just confidence for the future."

9. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 13.
10. Payne, ed., *D. Broughton Knox, Selected Works*, pp. 60, 61.
11. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 85.
12. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 62.
13. Silva, *Philippians*, p. 45.

#### CHAPTER THREE: PAUL'S JOYFUL AFFECTION

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians: INTERPRETATION*, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 18, mentions the passionate affection of Paul for his people in Romans 9:1-5 as a possible exception. But that is about his passion for his people, the Jews, not a church.
2. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 68, explains:
 

*καρδία* is employed in its customary OT sense of the whole person to describe the seat of the physical, spiritual, and mental life. It denotes the center and source of both physical life (Pss. 101:5; 103:15; Acts 14:17) and the whole inner life with its thinking (2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 1:18), feelings or emotions (Rom. 1:24; 9:2; 2 Cor. 2:4, etc.), and volition (2 Cor. 9:7).
3. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 91.
4. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 64.
5. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 92, explains:

There can be little question that the first phrase, "in my chains," refers to Paul's present imprisonment. Here is the first mention of the "suffering" motif, which surfaces throughout this letter, and probably carries more significance than many interpreters are ready to allow. Although "chains" could possibly be a metonymy for imprisonment as such, most likely Paul was literally chained to his guards. The way this similar idea is expressed in 2 Tim 2:9 makes it difficult to imagine anything other than literal chains in that case. Probably the same is true here, since in Roman prisons "imprisonment without chains was a concession to high status." In any case, the repetition of the phrase, "my chains," in vv. 13, 14, and 17 indicates that he is smarting under the imprisonment, in part perhaps because he is not free to roam about.

6. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 69.
7. J. A. Motyer, *Philippian Studies: The Richness of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966), p. 26.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: PAUL'S PRAYER

1. D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 20.
2. *Bengel's New Testament Commentary, Vol. 2: Romans — Revelation*, trans. Charlton T. Lewis and Marvin R. Vincent (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1981), p. 426.
3. F. J. Sheed, *Theology and Sanity* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), pp. 9, 10.
4. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 76.
5. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 67.
6. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, pp. 76, 77.
7. Earl F. Palmer, *Integrity: A Commentary on the Book of Philippians* (Vancouver: Regent, 1992), p. 53.
8. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 68.
9. *Ibid.*