

October 8 & 9, 2022

No Matter What: Gratitude

Philippians 1:1-11

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April 10, 2013 a letter went up for auction in New York. The letter, known as “The Secret of Life” was written by Francis Crick to his 12-year old son, Michael in 1953. The seven-page, hand-written letter outlined the revolutionary discovery of the structure and function of DNA and included a simple sketch of the now-famous double helix. An anonymous bidder purchased the letter for nearly \$6.1 million.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians could also be called “The Secret of Life”. It’s not a letter about some scientific discovery, nor does it contain any cool illustrations. Instead, it reveals a pathway to living with joy no matter what our circumstances. And here’s some good news: you don’t need to pay over \$6 million for this treasure. If you own a bible, you already have a copy. And what we’re going to learn together is priceless.

I think it’s important to remember that what we’re about to dive into is a letter, a letter written by a real person to a real community of people nearly 2,000 years ago. I think that Paul, the author of the letter, would be blown away if he knew we were still reading his mail. In Paul’s mind Paul wasn’t writing Scripture. He was writing a piece of correspondence. And yet, his words, empowered by the Holy Spirit, continue to speak into the hearts and lives of people just like you and me.

Not long after meeting the risen Christ on the Damascus Road, Paul traveled throughout the ancient world preaching the Gospel and establishing churches. Philippi, in northern Greece, was the very first place in Europe that heard that there was a new King, the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. And that was very controversial news in Philippi. As a Roman colony Philippi was filled with retired Roman military and lots of patriotic spirit directed toward Caesar whom they referred to as Lord and Savior. In other words, Paul’s “Good News” of a new king was both dangerous and treasonous. But the Gospel took root in Philippi, which is a story you can read in Acts 16. After establishing the church in Philippi, Paul continued his missionary journey and eventually wound up in prison in Ephesus for proclaiming the Good News. And it is from that imprisonment that Paul writes this letter that we call Philippians.

Now, grab your bible and open it up to Philippians. Philippians is one of four little letters from Paul that are grouped together in the last third of our New Testament. You’ll find it after Ephesians and before Colossians.

Throughout this series we’re going to go through the text section by section. I’d encourage you to have your bible handy each week and write notes in the margins.

Let’s start at the beginning, with Paul’s greeting in verses 1-2: *This letter is from Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. I am writing to all of God’s holy people in Philippi who belong to Christ Jesus, including the church leaders and deacons. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.*

Paul uses the traditional opening for ancient letters, identifying who the letter is from, to whom it’s addressed and a greeting. While Paul clearly wrote the letter, he graciously includes his young assistant, Timothy, in the greeting. Timothy had been with Paul when he planted the church in Philippi and so the Philippians knew him well. But underline how Paul identifies himself and Timothy – as “servants of Christ Jesus.” Not servants by force, but by choice. What a remarkable phrase. Paul believed that he owed his entire life to Christ and so his life was completely dedicated to spreading the Good News of God’s love.

Try this. Say out loud, “I am a servant” Go ahead. Feels uncomfortable, doesn’t it? Which raises the question, how would you identify yourself? As a casual acquaintance of Christ? A close friend of Christ, or a distant admirer? But I suppose the larger question is, how would you like to identify yourself in relationship to Christ Jesus? Here’s the amazing thing, and the Good News – no matter how you answer that question, Christ Jesus calls you beloved friend.

Paul then continues his letter with a prayer of thanksgiving. Let’s look at verses 3-6:

Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

You can just feel Paul’s deep affection for this community of faith, can’t you? And we’ll learn along the way several reasons why that’s so, but Paul gives one of the key reasons in these verses – because the Philippians have been partners with Paul in spreading the Gospel. The Greek word behind “partners” usually refers to business partners, which implies that the Philippians didn’t just give lip service to the work of the Gospel; they put their money where their mouth was.

And that raises a couple of questions for us to consider. Do you see yourself as an observer of God’s work in the world? A participant? Or a partner? And if a partner, are

you, like the Philippians putting your money where your mouth is and financially supporting God's work of changing lives through this ministry or some other ministry?

Let's continue with verses 7-8:

So it is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a special place in my heart. You share with me the special favor of God, both in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.

When you're a prisoner in an American prison, your meals are provided for you by the taxpayers. But that wasn't so in a Roman prison. As a prisoner Paul was entirely dependent upon the generous support of others to survive, and the Philippians had been one of his most generous supporters. They had sent a man named Epaphroditus to carry a financial gift from Philippi to Ephesus...a journey of over 500 miles. Can you imagine yourself in a dank prison cell, uncertain of your fate. Not knowing whether you're going to live or die or even starve to death. You don't have a cell phone or email to contact people. You are completely dependent upon the grace of God and the generosity of others. And then suddenly a man who has traveled for weeks appears with both financial support and even more importantly with the love and support of others. Is it any wonder that Paul expresses his deep love for the Philippians?

Is there someone in your life right now who might be feeling a bit like Paul? Hopeless, helpless, and lonely? How can you carry Christ's love into their life? Maybe it's a card or a letter. Or a phone call. Or a visit if you're able. And if you're feeling hopeless, helpless, and lonely yourself, don't suffer alone. Connect with someone from our pastoral staff or spiritual care team and let us know how we can support you with Christ's love.

Let's wrap it up by reading verses 9-11,

I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God.

Every parent has a host of hopes and dreams for their children – good health, an education, satisfying relationships. And faithful parents pray for those things for their children. The more you read Paul's letters the more you realize that Paul feels like a spiritual father to these faith communities. In partnership with the Holy Spirit, Paul "birthed" these communities and he is

filled with love and gratitude for them, especially this Philippian community. And so, like any good and faithful parent, Paul has a host of hopes and dreams for this faith community, and he regularly prays for them. And these three verses give us a window into Paul's prayers. And notice what's at the top of the list – love. Love for God, for one another and for their neighbor. And he prays for knowledge – a deepening understanding of who God is, how God works in the world and how God wants them to live. In Paul's mind, love and knowledge are like guardrails that will keep the Philippians moving down the road of being formed into the likeness of Christ.

Back in verse 6 Paul wrote, *"And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns."* And now we see what that "work" is. It's God's work to conform their lives into the likeness of Christ, overflowing with love and grace and wisdom. And not just for their own benefit, but because living that way reveals Christ to the world. People will ask, "Why are you so different? So kind and gracious?" And that can become an opportunity to tell a neighbor about Jesus.

Just as Paul wanted these things for the Philippian church, I want them for you. I long for you to be constantly filled with the fruit of your relationship with God through Christ, to be filled with love for God, one another, and our neighbors. To know God more intimately day by day and to be filled with the kind of wisdom that guides you through life. To know the peace of Christ that passes all understanding so that no matter what's happening in your life, no matter what you're going through, at a deep place you rest in the knowledge that you are never alone, and that Christ is with you, especially through the body of Christ. That's what Paul wanted for his congregation, and so he prayed for them. I want all of that in my life, and I long for it in yours, too. So I'd like to pray for you now...

God, I pray that your love will overflow more and more in the lives of every individual who hears my voice right now. And I pray that they would keep on growing in knowledge and understanding...understanding what really matters in life so that everyone who sees how they live will see a reflection of you. May they always be filled with the fruit of salvation...Christ-like character, peace that passes all understanding, hope that nothing can diminish and a joy that sustains them through even the most difficult of days. All this I pray in the strong name of Christ. Amen.