

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Our Past, Our Present, Our Future**

Philippians 1:1-11

Since announcing my retirement plans about a month ago, you've had lots of good questions for me and Debby. Have you changed your mind? Will you still be living in the area? What kinds of things do you plan to do in retirement? Where will you go to church? We appreciate all the ways that you've continued to engage with us and express your interest in what's next for us.

These questions are part of a larger conversation about what lies ahead not only for the two of us but for our church. When news of a pastor's departure gets released, it's normal and healthy for folks in the fellowship to start thinking even more carefully and intentionally about the congregation's path forward. This comes with its own set of questions. Who will be preaching on Sundays? Will we have an interim pastor? What's the process for seeking the church's next pastor? Who will be involved in that process? How long does that process take?

Some of you have been through this type of transition process before. Others of you are new to a season of change like this. You're understandably wondering about how, and how long, this will all unfold. We certainly don't have all the answers to these questions at this stage of the journey. But we have made a faithful start in seeking God's will and God's way forward. In particular, our deacons and I, along other key leaders in the church, have started engaging with one another, and with partners outside the congregation, so that we can humbly and prayerfully plan and discern God's direction together.

One part of such discernment, a piece that never changes, is the word of God. No matter what chapter of our church's story we're in, we're always staying attentive to what God is saying to us, individually and together. We're listening for how God is speaking into the life of our congregation. One of the primary ways we do that is by opening the Scriptures and listening to the proclamation of the word of God here in congregational worship. To that end, I want to use today's message to begin a series of sermons that will take us through my remaining Sundays with you. From now through the end of August, we'll be searching the letter called Philippians, paying particular attention to how it can shed light on our church's path into this season of change.

Some of you may have explored or studied Philippians before. Others of you may be entirely new to this portion of the Scriptures. Or you may have a little knowledge of this letter through some of its memorable statements and phrases that make it onto our lips, our T-shirts, our wall hangings, or our bumper stickers. "To live is Christ and to die is gain" (1:21). "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (4:4). "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (4:6-7)." I couldn't begin to count how many times during my ministry with you I've opened the Bible to that one at the close of a visit during moments and seasons of sickness, grief, and other experiences of suffering. Or how about

this one: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (4:13). All these oft-cited Scriptures come from Philippians. But it's critical to hear and explore the letter as a whole. So as preparation for this series of sermons, and as a way for you to participate in our church's discernment during this period of transition, I would encourage you to spend time this week reading through the entire letter. It's a fairly brief letter, only four chapters long. You can read it in one sitting, or in larger portions over a period of days, or both, so that you begin to get its words and themes into your heart and mind. And pray for the Holy Spirit to give light to your and my understanding as we go deeper into this part of God's word.

First, just a few introductory notes that can help you begin to get a handle on this letter. It was written by Paul to a church in Philippi, in northern Greece. Philippi was a Roman colony. About a hundred years before Paul came to that area, Philippi had been the setting for one of the great battles of the Roman civil war. After the war ended, there were lots of soldiers there with nothing more to do. Rather than having them return to Rome, these veterans were given land in and around Philippi. During Paul's time there, there were a lot of families who had descended from the original Roman colonists. The citizens of Philippi were proud of being Romans, and wanted life in the colony to be ordered as a reflection of life in the capital city of Rome.

Though we don't know exactly when Paul wrote this letter, we do know that he wrote it from some place where he was in prison under Roman authority. Paul's experience of being jailed figures into many of the things that he says in the letter, and we'll have opportunities to unpack that more when we get to those specific texts. But for now, it's important to know that Philippians is no leisurely correspondence between a congregation and its founder. It's a deeply personal, and also theologically rich, piece of communication between Paul and a community of his partners in the gospel.

With all that in mind, let's turn to today's text, 1:1-11. Paul opens the letter by identifying himself as the author, and his fellow worker Timothy as the co-sender. He speaks of his and Timothy's commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord, with the accent on sacrificial service. Then Paul addresses the congregation, whom he calls "the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi" (v. 1). "Saints" or "holy ones" is a term Paul uses often in referring to Christ followers. He's not speaking about a particular group that has an elite spiritual status within the church. No, he applies the word "holy" to the whole congregation, to every believer, though here in Philippians Paul does single out particular leaders in the fellowship, whom he refers to as "overseers and deacons" (v. 1). Then Paul closes out his greeting by extending "grace" and "peace" to the Philippians. He's doing way more here than just wishing them well. He's reminding them that who they are, individually and together, is grounded in the redeeming grace and restorative peace that have come from God to them through Jesus Christ.

After his opening address and greeting, Paul moves into the rest of today's text, which includes mostly thanksgiving and prayer for the Philippians. The thanksgiving, though a typical part of Paul's letters, shouldn't be overlooked. In the Greek, the word for "grace" (*charis*) is part of the larger word for "give thanks" (*eucharisteo*). God's action toward us in Christ is grace, and our action toward God is gratitude. The two go together. Giving and receiving are the essential dynamics of the relationship between God and his people.

Paul starts out his thanksgiving by expressing his gratitude to God for his people there in the Philippian congregation. As memories of his relationship with them flood Paul's mind, he brings those memories into the presence of God with thanks. "I always pray with joy", says Paul (v. 4). This is the first reference to a word, a mood, that runs throughout Paul's

letter. The words for “joy,” “rejoice,” and “rejoice with” occur a total of sixteen times in the letter. In fact, Philippians is sometimes called the “epistle of joy.” Paul says the reason for his joy is their “partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (v. 5). Here is Paul looking back to when he first arrived in Philippi. Their initial receptiveness to the gospel has continued and is evident in all the ways that they’ve partnered with him in its progress. Paul’s word for “partnership” is the term from which we get the word “fellowship.” It means much more than just spending time with one another in the life of the church, especially when gathering for a monthly potluck. “Fellowship/Partnership” means identifying yourself with, having a shared commitment to, or demonstrating steady participation in the work of the gospel.

The Philippians partnership with Paul in the gospel feeds into his confidence, which comes most of all from the faithfulness of God. “Being confident of this,” says Paul, “that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (v. 6). The Lord who began the work of grace, through the gospel, in the hearts and minds and lives of the Philippians, can be counted on to see it through to completion. As one commentator has summarized it, “God himself is a ‘finisher’ as well as a ‘beginner.’”<sup>1</sup> At Christ’s coming, the day of judgment, the full scope of God’s reign will be disclosed, and all those who belong to Christ will experience salvation in its fullness. God doesn’t abandon what he starts. His mission of a new creation in Christ will be accomplished.

This confident and upbeat tone abides here among us in Bryans Road just as it did among the believers in Philippi. One of the primary ways that the opening of Philippians can speak into our life as a congregation right now, as we prepare for a season of transition, is to remind us that our ultimate confidence and assurance are grounded in the faithfulness of God. We give thanks to God for his grace in Christ, for one another, and for the progress of the gospel among us. You and I are part of God’s great story of the redemption of the world through our Lord Jesus Christ. And within this great story is the smaller narrative of the birth and formation of Grace Baptist Church, almost 67 years ago. And within that story is the chapter that you and I have shared as partners in the gospel for more than 24 years. As pastor and people, you and I can look back and see that we have a past to be grateful for.

We also have a present in which we can continue to be in the gospel business together. So it was for Paul and the Philippians. In verse 7 of today’s text he continues, “It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart.” Paul’s affection for and devotion to the people in his churches come across at many points in his letters. True, so do his frustration, worry, anger, and disappointment with them. But at all times, Paul loves them. And as he writes his letters out of love, this one, Philippians, breathes a level of affection and enjoyment that exceeds the others.

It sounds like the believers in Philippi were the ones who gave Paul the most joy. He says that whether he was in jail or out more freely spreading the gospel, “all of you share in God’s grace with me” (v. 7). Then he goes on to describe his love for them as the very love of Christ. “God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus” (v. 8). The word translated as “affection” has to do with the inward parts of the body, the bowels/intestines. It’s a way of speaking about a kind of heartfelt compassion that comes from deep within. In other words, Paul’s love for the Philippians is really an extension of Christ’s compassion and care for them. Though it’s at work in and through Paul, its power, its source, is Christ himself.

When we think about not only our past but also our present as pastor and people here at Grace Baptist Church, you and I can give thanks for what’s right in front of us and right

around us. Uplifting memories of the past may and should come to mind, but we shouldn't let those recollections keep us from recognizing the preciousness of the present. Nor should we be so occupied by what may be ahead that we miss out on the opportunities of the present. Our partnership in the gospel here this very morning, and in the days leading through August, is a gift of God to be stewarded actively and intentionally. This moment in our story isn't a time for us to just sit and idle as a congregation, waiting passively, content just to make it to the next stage of things. No, we're going to use this God-given opportunity called the present to participate steadily and faithfully in what God is doing among us and through us right now. Day in and day out, we're still worshipping, working, and witnessing for the sake of God's kingdom.

This brings us to the last segment of today's text, verses 9-11. After recalling how it has been between himself and the Philippians, then reflecting on how it is currently between him and the Philippians, Paul now prays about how he hopes it will be with the Philippians. Above all, he prays that they will grow and mature in love. While this includes emotional affection for one another, it goes beyond feelings into matters of knowledge and wisdom (v. 9). Notice that when it comes to loving others, instead of strictly isolating the head and the heart from one another, Paul joins them. He unites emotion with cognition. They're bound up together. Genuine Christian love will work itself out through knowledge and wisdom. This means more than just book-learning. It means insight into and understanding of God's will, ways, and purposes, especially his saving grace toward the world.

Paul also prays that this "wise love," as one person has called it, will produce moral discernment (v. 10).<sup>2</sup> In other words, it will enable the Philippians to distinguish between good and evil, to strive for what's excellent. Then Paul prays that this moral excellence, this right living, will be like fruit that multiplies in their congregation. His desire is for them to flourish in Christlikeness, always with an eye toward the day of Christ, when God, in his faithfulness, will finish what he has started. Then, as now, this will all be for the praise and glory of God (v. 11).

Our past, our present, our future. When it comes to our partnership in the gospel, as pastor and people, we have all three. And we need all three as we move further into this season of transition. We need our recollection of the past, remembering God's faithfulness and his work that has brought us to this point. We need attentiveness to the present, trusting that God is working here and now, as we participate in his grace. And we need one another's commitment and prayers for the future, that this congregation will continue to make progress in love, and will have the God-given discernment necessary to do what's good and to focus on what's most important, especially with the plans and decisions that lie ahead of us. Though we don't have all the details in advance, we do have the confidence and assurance that come with knowing that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ." Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone: 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition with Study Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2023) Kindle edition.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone*.