

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 17, 2025

A Forward-Facing Church

Philippians 3:1-16

Today we come to the sixth sermon in our series on Paul's letter to the Philippians. During the first five messages, we've gotten a growing sense of the deep relationship between Paul and this particular community of Christians. In the process, we've been listening for how God is speaking to us, individually and together, especially as we move further into this season of transition in our congregation's life.

So far we've witnessed Paul's gratitude and prayerfulness for the Christians in Philippi. We've noted their shared confidence in God's faithfulness to complete the work of salvation that he has begun among them through the gospel. This gospel, the good news that Jesus is Lord, is progressing in their lives and in the world, often in spite of, and actually through, Paul and the Philippians' mutual suffering and hardships. With Christ as their main subject, the Philippians are called to practice their loyalty to Jesus in the midst of resistance and opposition, living in unity with one another by exhibiting humility. This humility comes through having the "mind of Christ," the primary exemplar whose self-emptying and exaltation was described in the Christ hymn, the story that defines the church and its purpose, and holds it together. This inward unity that comes from having the mind of Christ then strengthens them in their outward witness in the world. Both their inward unity and their outward witness require that they have models of the gospel around them, individuals who exemplify the way of Christ, people like Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Today, we move into chapter 3. Paul begins by saying, "Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!" (v. 1). "Finally" doesn't mean the letter is nearly over. It's just Paul's way of transitioning to his next topic. It's more like, "As for the rest of what needs to be said." In this case, the rest of what needs to be said includes what he has already said, particularly about the importance of rejoicing. For Paul, joy is less something you feel and more something you do, primarily through praise and singing. Whatever the circumstances or pressures, being grounded in a relationship with Christ calls for rejoicing.

So Paul wants the Philippians to be on guard against anything that might threaten their joy, which brings him to a subject that he has raised with them before. It has to do with Jewish Christian missionaries whom Paul has come up against in other churches at other points in the course of his ministry. From what we can tell, these adversaries haven't yet infiltrated the church in Philippi, so Paul wants his congregants to remain vigilant. He gets pretty crude and caustic, calling these opponents "dogs, men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh" (v. 2). This last phrase is probably a reference to his competitors' insistence that Gentile Christians be circumcised and come under the authority of the law of Moses in order to complete their salvation and enter fully into membership in God's people. For Paul, this is extremely mistaken and dangerous. He insists that what God has done in the person of Jesus Christ, most of all in his death and resurrection, is completely sufficient to rescue us from sin and death, to reconcile us to himself, and to bring us into the life of the world to come. This grace of God in Jesus Christ, received in faith, is enough. Enough to make us

one with God. Enough to make us one with each other, serving Christ together in the power of the Spirit.

To strengthen his warning, Paul narrates his own past, reminding the Philippians that he himself once lived on the basis of “confidence in the flesh” (v. 3). He’s referring not only to the practice of circumcision as a sign of relationship with God and membership in God’s people, but also in a broader sense to relationship with God based on human effort and achievement. Don’t forget, says Paul, that I once lived this before Christ and outside of Christ kind of life.

Remember that Paul had a solid Jewish pedigree. What’s more he was a Pharisee, a group deeply committed to obedience to the whole law, written and oral. His zeal for the things of God even led him to persecute followers of Jesus, who in his eyes were posing a threat to the purity and integrity of God’s people. Put all this together and it’s clear that Paul possessed quite a religious resume. Surely none of the Jewish Christian missionaries who might come knocking on the door of the church in Philippi could top that.

“But,” says Paul, “whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ” (v. 7). Paul’s experience of Christ brought about a “spiritual paradigm shift” in his life.¹ He describes it using the terminology of accounting. “What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things” (v. 8). Previously, Paul viewed his personal story as a gain, an asset—his family, his nationality, his faith, his achievements and accomplishments. But through knowing Christ, all these things that once formed his identity he now views as a loss. In fact, he describes them as “garbage, excrement, crud,” compared to what lies ahead in Christ.²

When we hear Paul using derogatory language to describe his missionary opponents, or when we hear him speaking of his previous religious accomplishments as dung, it’s tempting to think that his descriptions are too extreme or over the top. Granted, Paul doesn’t pull any punches when it comes to defending his understanding of the gospel. But we also need to keep in mind his ultimate goal for the people in his congregations. He wants them to be formed into the likeness of Christ, having the mind of Christ. We saw what the mind of Christ looks like in the Christ hymn, the story of how Jesus emptied himself and was raised by the power of God. So Jesus himself is the chief exemplar of the gospel. Then Paul used Timothy and Epaphroditus as models of the gospel. And now, Paul tells his own story, so that the Philippians can see in it the pattern of Christ. Before experiencing Christ, Paul’s story was one of upward advancement. But after coming to know Christ, the way downward turns out to be the way that leads to true life. What used to look like gain turned out to be loss. But now what looks like loss is actually gain.

Henri Nouwen wrote, “Everything in me wants to move upward. Downward mobility with Jesus goes radically against my inclinations, against the advice of the world surrounding me, and against the culture of which I am a part.”³ Yet this is the way to which God calls you and me, individually and collectively. For each of us, and for all of us together as Grace Baptist Church, the way forward is the way downward. The righteousness that we most need isn’t something that we attain by spiritual self-improvement. Rather, it comes to us as a gift from God in Christ, a gift that descends to us. And receiving this unmerited righteousness by faith draws us downward, giving ourselves up to God in total trust, relying upon him to lift us up into life.

Paul says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (v. 10). I want to know Christ. The desire to know Christ, in a

deep, personal, relational, and transformative way, should be the primary yearning of every person who comes into or goes forth from this congregation. So whatever the specifics of our church's path in upcoming months, keeping Christ as the focus of our congregation's life, and of each of our lives, will help ensure that we stay the course and remain vigilant about anything and everything that could distract us from the basic gospel message. God's grace in Christ, received by faith, is sufficient. But the faith that receives this grace will take the form of obedience to the way of the Christ whom we long to know.

Truly knowing Christ includes "sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death," says Paul. Yes, we want to have the life of Jesus, the life-giving power of God who raised him from the dead, at work in each of us and in our church. But having the life of Jesus in you is inseparable from having the death of Jesus in you too. The glory can't be disconnected from the agony. The triumph can't be separated from the suffering. For followers of our Lord, wearing the crown and bearing the cross go together.

Earlier this week, I was moved reading the story of David Lin, a Taiwanese American man who was detained by the Chinese government from 2006 to 2024 on charges related to his missionary work in the country. He was released last September in a prisoner exchange brokered by the US government. After being reunited with his family, Lin was emaciated, and hinted at some of the horrors he faced inside the Beijing prison. Asked if he had ever questioned God during his time in prison, he said, "I don't have time for thinking about that. I just follow God's leading every day." God's leading included translating the Bible, ministering to his cellmates, and sharing the gospel. Lin also stressed the toll that the experience had taken on his family as they worried about him, dealt with the trauma, and faced financial risks.

Lin's experience reminded me of Paul's context as he wrote to the Philippians. We've highlighted his imprisonment for the sake of the gospel, how he sees this as part of suffering with Christ, and how he and the Philippians share in one another's sufferings. You and I may not face the kind of hardship and trauma that Paul or David Lin endured, but we're still called to share in the sufferings of Christ, to move in the downward way through self-emptying service for the sake of the gospel, to take up our own crosses, as Jesus put it, and follow him. If we don't, then we can't truly claim to want to know him.

"Becoming like him in his death," says Paul, "and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead (v. 11). That's Paul's primary goal, the final resurrection. Yes, we've already heard him say that if he's given the death sentence, he's at peace with that. He'll be with the Lord. But Paul doesn't regard that as his ultimate objective. For him, and for every believer, life is always aimed at the coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the full arrival of God's new creation, the reign of our Lord on earth as it is in heaven.

This is why the life of every cross-bearing Christian, and the life of every cross-formed congregation, is a forward-facing life. This is a word for us, particularly as we go through the journey of the next two weeks and further into this season of transition. True, our past is an important part of who we are as Grace Baptist Church. Though I've had the blessing of serving you for the past 24 and a half years, the story of this congregation was well underway for several decades before I arrived. And some of you were serving here as part of that story for much longer than I have been.

During recent days, I've been busy going through and sorting files in my office, including letters, photos, bulletins, and other documents that prompt a look back. Back to moments and memories over the past two and a half decades. Moments both joyful and sorrowful. Memories of both the highs and the lows. Recollections of times of unity and times of

disagreement. Experiences of progress and struggles through problems. These moments and memories will always be part of who we are, individually and together. But as partners in the gospel, where we've been, for which we give thanks, is not the primary thing that defines us. What defines us most is the future, the future we're promised in Christ.

Paul says, "Brothers and sisters in Christ, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what is ahead" (v. 13). For Paul, forgetting what is behind doesn't mean that it's completely erased and gone. After all, he has just spent several verses remembering and retelling an essential part of his own personal story. But that part of his story gets evaluated and interpreted in light of Christ, both Christ present and Christ future. And so for us, how we understand what's now behind us as a church is determined by what's still ahead of us.

"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus," says Paul (v. 14). Earlier, Paul told some of his own story through the lens of bookkeeping. Now he switches to sports. He pictures himself as an athlete sprinting toward the end of the race. When the finish line comes into view, a runner doesn't ease up and settle for the distance already covered. He or she strains forward to reach the goal. That's what matters most. For those who are in Christ, the goal is the resurrection, living in God's new world with new bodies. This is what it means for us to be called heavenward.

Already, though, the traits of heaven can be experienced and seen in the lives of Jesus' followers and in the life of the church. Christ's resurrection produces effects here and now in our congregation. This doesn't mean that we've already "arrived," spiritually speaking. Paul tells the Philippians, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect" (v. 12). So Paul uses some of his own life story not only to warn the Philippians against legalism, but to alert them to the dangers of perfectionism. True, they've aimed their lives toward the consummation of all things in Christ. But they're not there yet. The ultimate goal is complete maturity in Christ. For now, though, one of the signs of true spiritual maturity is acknowledging your imperfection, and thus your need for the grace and power of God. In the days and weeks ahead, you'll continue to be broken and fallen human beings, far from perfect, yet indwelt by the one who is perfect. Christ in you, in this church, moving you forward toward the fulfillment of God's promises.

For now, we need to, as Paul puts it, "live up to what we have already attained" (v. 16). The grace of God in Christ has brought us this far. Going forward, you're called to keep the focus on Christ, whose value surpasses all other things. The greatness of knowing him surpasses everything else.

In one religious group in Ghana, there's a symbol called the Sankofa bird. According to James K. A. Smith, "the Sankofa is a majestic bird with its head turned back over its shoulder to look back. But the bird is moving forward, attentive to its past. In its mouth it carries an egg or a seed, signifying life that is to come." The symbol is attended by a proverb, which means, "Go back and fetch it." Smith summarizes the symbol's significance for us this way: "God does not want to undo our pasts; nor does he want us to nostalgically dwell on our pasts; God's grace goes back to fetch our pasts for the sake of the future." May the grace of God in Christ always enable us to be a forward-facing church.⁴

¹ Todd D. Still, *Philippians and Philemon*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2011) 105.

² Still, *Philippians and Philemon*, 106.

³ *New Oxford Review* (April 1987). Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, no. 5.

⁴ James K. A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022) 63.