

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **A Grateful Ending**

Philippians 4:10-23

"And in conclusion...." What worshiper's ears wouldn't perk up when they hear those words come out of the preacher's mouth. Such words signal that the end of the sermon is near. All that stands between you and a catered Sunday lunch are a few more closing thoughts from the person behind the pulpit. Unless those words, "And in conclusion...", are just the beginning of what turns out to be a lengthy conclusion. There's nothing that says a conclusion necessarily has to be brief.

And sometimes what sounds like a conclusion may not actually be the conclusion. We encountered some of that in last Sunday's text from Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi. Our Scripture passage ended with Paul saying, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (4:8-9). Those sound like the perfect words for a pastor preaching his last sermon to close things out and bless the congregation. Or in the case of the text, for Paul to wrap up his letter to the Philippians.

But Paul's not done yet. There's more he wants to say. It's not a short but dense summary of his theology. It's not one last trip down memory lane. It's not an outline of the transition plan going forward. It's something very basic, something that captures what God has done in Christ and what the Christians in Philippi have done for him. It's this: Thank you.

Recall that Paul is in prison, incarcerated for his devotion to Christ and for propagating the message that Jesus is Lord. There's even a possibility that Paul will get the death penalty. So the letter we call Philippians isn't a piece of casual correspondence, composed on a laptop from the comfort of a coffee shop, arriving instantaneously in the church's inbox. No, Philippians is a deeply personal and theologically rich letter, transported by human hands across hundreds of miles. Paul would much rather be with the congregation in person, but he can't, so this letter is a substitute for his personal presence. It captures what he would want to say to them if he were there with them face to face.

Keep in mind too that what occasioned this letter was a gift that the church in Philippi had sent to Paul through the congregation's messenger, Epaphroditus. In that time, prisoners were generally not cared for by the state, but relied on friends and relatives for food and other necessities. The Philippians had reached out to Paul with compassion and care, particularly through a financial gift that Paul could use to buy food and meet basic needs. It's remarkable to consider how one gift set in motion a letter through which God still speaks to us in our contemporary context.

Paul begins today's text by saying, "I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no

opportunity to show it" (v. 10). Paul doesn't want to end his letter without expressing his thankfulness for their generosity. He thinks back to that particularly dark and discouraging day, when the jail guard said, "Paul, you have a visitor." It was Epaphroditus, carrying a gift. No wonder Paul wants the Philippians to know that he's grateful. But rather than overflowing with thanks, Paul is somewhat guarded and cautious about the way he articulates his appreciation. Granted, it gives him a lot of joy to know that the Philippians have been staying loyal to Jesus and that they haven't forgotten him. And now, through their gift, they've renewed their friendship with him, and for that he's grateful.

But at the same time, he doesn't want them to think he's the kind of person who grumbles if God doesn't keep him comfortable, or that he's in the business of the gospel for the money. The fact that Paul doesn't thank them profusely is partly a reflection of friendship practices in that day and time, where the emphasis was on mutuality and reciprocity, giving and receiving. The Philippians have given, and Paul has received, gratefully. But they shouldn't perceive him mainly as a person in need, dependent on them (v. 11). In fact, his hardships and sufferings for Christ have helped him learn one of life's greatest lessons, contentment.

"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (v. 11-12). In Paul's day, the subject of contentment was a popular topic among many of the schools of philosophy, especially the Stoics. For them and many others, contentment was largely a matter of self-sufficiency. By resigning yourself to certain realities and finding the right resources within yourself, you could achieve and experience personal serenity. But Paul's view is different. When it comes to contentment, he says he has "learned the secret."

Anytime someone announces, "I have learned the secret," our ears perk up. Here is someone who has insider knowledge, and if I want to be on the inside I need to have this knowledge too. So something is about to be revealed. Something that could change my life. Something that could change the course of my existence. Something that could open up a different future for me. Paul says, "I have learned the secret...." Here it is. Wait for it. Wait for it.

"I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (v. 13). "Him" could refer to either God or Christ. It's hard to be absolutely sure. I lean more toward Christ, who is God revealed to us, God present with us. In either case, the main point is that contentment comes from commitment to the all-sufficient, ever-present Christ. Knowing Christ means having the saving power of God, who raised him from the dead, dwelling in you and working in you. In other words, contentment comes from knowing that what you most need in order to be who God intends you to be lies on the outside of you, not on the inside of you. Instead of turning inward to your own resources, the key is to turn outward toward the grace of God in Christ.

I can certainly testify to this in my own experience of knowing Christ and carrying out his calling in my life. Especially in my vocation as a pastor, at my previous church and here in my partnership with you for the past 24 and a half years, what I have been able to do has only been possible because of the indwelling, strengthening power of Christ, at work in and through me. One of my favorite books on preaching includes a quotation from British sculptor and artist Henry Moore, who says, "The secret to life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for the rest of your life. And the most important thing is—it must be something you cannot possibly do!"<sup>1</sup> In and of myself, I could not have been or still be who I am, or have done or

still do what I'm doing here before you this day, apart from the presence and power of Christ.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes, "Christ says, 'Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you.... Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours.'"<sup>2</sup> I sense this is part of what Paul is getting at, including in his letter to the Philippians, when he speaks about being joined to Christ by faith, being shaped and formed in the likeness of Christ, having what Paul calls the "mind of Christ." Only as Christ lives in you can your life take on the pattern of his life in death and resurrection. "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

That sounds like it could be a fitting conclusion. But Paul goes on with his extended thank you note. He recalls how the Philippians have been generous and faithful partners in Christ from way back. As soon as the gospel arrived in Philippi and its environs, the believers entered into a giving and receiving kind of relationship with Paul. He says, "For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need" (v. 16). Here is an expression of mutual commitment that endures across time.

It prompts me to pause and join you in giving thanks to God for the durability and longevity of our relationship as pastor and congregation. My first Sunday with you was April Fools Day 2001. That tidbit of history has always brought a grin to our faces. But what began that day was certainly no joke. What God started on our first Lord's Day together has, by his grace and power, endured and thrived across time. I remember seeing a cartoon in a clergy magazine where a pastor had recently come to a new church, and was browsing the wall of photos of the previous pastors. The longer he looked the more he noticed that one pastor had served between one and two years, another pastor a few months, another pastor one year, and on it went. The display was basically a history of brief pastorates. The caption said that pastor so and so was now beginning to wonder if he had made a mistake in accepting the call to that particular congregation.

I join you in giving thanks to God, and I give thanks to you yourselves, for your long-term commitment to our partnership in the gospel. Our twenty-four and a half years together have been a gift from the Lord, a gift that takes on even greater meaning when we place it within the larger story of Grace Baptist Church. Two weeks from today, you'll celebrate our congregation's 67th anniversary. What a blessing to be able to reflect on the fact that the time you and I have shared together has comprised more than one-third of this church's entire story. I say that not to draw attention to myself or to you, but as a way for us to focus our attention on God and to give him the glory.

In our text, Paul himself moves in that direction by first thanking the Philippians more directly for their most recent gift. This time Paul doesn't hem and haw. He comes right out, using accounting terminology to praise them for their lavish generosity. "I have received full payment and even more. I am amply supplied" (v. 18). In other words, he's filled to the full. He has more than enough. And what matters isn't primarily the financial support itself, but what that gift says about their partnership with Paul in the gospel. It's not just their giving; It's the faith, hope, and love behind the giving. It's the relationship that's revealed and expressed by the way that he and they give to and receive from one another.

Likewise, among the many things that stand out about my and Debby's fellowship with you for nearly a quarter of a century is the generosity that you've expressed toward us and toward one another, and what that says about your faith, hope, and love, and our

relationship with you. All the ways that you have given yourselves to Christ, given yourselves to this congregation, given yourselves to the reign of God in this community and in the world, have been signs and expressions of the resurrecting, life-giving power of God at work in you. The self-emptying of Christ, who gave himself fully and completely in order to redeem us, has taken shape in you, and is still being formed in you. The mind of Christ, the way of Christ, is evident in your generosity.

And that generosity is pleasing to God. God's heart is gladdened when the riches of his grace, poured into our lives through Christ, take shape in our own giving and receiving. It all begins in Christ, who lowered himself all the way down into death on the cross for us, and was raised by the power of God, and now reigns as Lord. Christ himself is the way Paul's letter began, and now Christ is the way the letter ends. He always has been, still is, and always will be the main subject of Grace Baptist Church.

In my presence with you and among you as your pastor, my primary assignment has been to point you to him. The Sukuma people of Tanzania have a proverb: "I pointed out the stars to you, and all you saw was the tip of my finger." In all the ways that I've been blessed to serve you, especially through this sacred task of preaching, my desire is that you've seen beyond me to see the Savior to whom I've pointed. He alone is our hope, which means that a big part of my job has been in learning how to get out of the way, so that Christ can do what he wants to do in your lives. As Eugene Peterson reminds me, "You are at your pastoral best when you are not noticed."<sup>3</sup>

Peterson also tells about a church elder who grew up in the Scottish Highlands, where "pastors were invisible six days a week and incomprehensible the seventh." Granted, a lot of a pastor's daily work is invisible to the congregation, and I'm sure I've preached a good number of sermons that left you wondering, "What in the world was he saying?" But know that there has been no greater joy for me than standing here before you on Sunday morning—the one day of the week when you actually see me at work—leading worship and proclaiming the word of God. This sanctuary space has been a spiritual home for us and for you.

So as we bring to a close this series of sermons on Philippians, a letter that begins with gratitude and ends with gratitude, it's fitting that today's text closes by bringing us into the space of worship, where I can say to you, Thank you, and we can all say to God, Thank you. "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (vv. 19-20).

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<sup>1</sup> Michael P. Knowles, *Of Seeds and the People of God: Preaching as Parable, Crucifixion, and Testimony* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015) 178.

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001) 196-197.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperOne, 2011) 292.