



## Dr. James C. Howell ePhilippians

### **ePhilippians40 – March 30 – wants and needs**

*And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit (Philippians 4:19-23).*

Paul puts the finishing touches on his letter to his friends, knowing he may never hear back from them, knowing they may never hear from him again either. So how do you say goodbye? How do we conclude an email series? We say out loud what really matters. We celebrate the best hope we can get our imaginations around. We speak of God, and God's future, the glory toward which we lean, in which we trust.

While we wait, while we endure, what will the time be like? "God will supply every need." Notice he does not say "every want," or "every want dressed up pretending to be a need." God will supply what we need – and in the teeth of suffering, and facing the imminence of death, you realize you don't need much at all. Just some love, some hope, a sense of purpose and that you have some destiny now hidden. You need God – and you have God, who will never let you go.

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### **ePhilippians39 – March 29 – gracious receivers**

*Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only; for even in Thessalonica you sent me help once and again. Not that I seek the gift; but I seek the fruit which increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more; I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God (Philippians 4:14-18).*

Paul reviews the extraordinary relationship he and the Christians at Philippi have enjoyed over many years. To rehearse the good that has transpired among friends is a way to deepen the relationship, not to take others for granted, and perhaps even to follow Paul's counsel earlier in chapter 4: Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

It may be hard for some of us to be gracious receivers. We prefer to be generous, not to feel we owe anybody, that we are indebted. But Christianity isn't just about giving. To grow in Christ, and to help others around us to grow in Christ, we need to let others give, and humbly find the way to be a gracious receiver. How did Paul put it? "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit in you." The fruit of the Spirit is love, kindness, generosity (Galatians 5:22) – and for love, kindness and generosity to happen, a good receiver of love, of kindness, of generosity is needed. Can I allow others to grow in grace and the Spirit?

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### **ePhilippians38 – March 28 – strength**

*I can do all things in him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13).*

Should I have some kind of prodigious confidence, and claim this verse to enable me to do whatever I dream?

[Ben Witherington](#) is in tune with Paul's true intention when he paraphrases this verse as "I am able to face (or cope with) all things in the One who strengthens me." He explains: "Paul is not saying he is superhuman and can do anything. In context, he is saying he has the inner strength to take whatever the world thrusts upon him."

So the tone isn't "can-do!" but "I never tremble in fear, or am paralyzed by circumstances." And the hidden secret is that it isn't that "I can do..." For Paul it is always "Not I but Christ in me." Christ acts in me, through me, in spite of me.

And perhaps there is one more nuance. Even if we keep the translation, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me," we can diagram the sentence carefully and understand it as "All things I do, I do in him who strengthens me." Many Christians do many things on their own, and turn to God's strength for a few things, when there is a crisis, when hearts are broken, when there is no place left to turn. But what if we did all things in him? What if his strength became the strength for every action, every thought, all day, every day, so habits would form, and we would feel an intimacy with God always, as if it were second nature, as if God and I have coalesced into a single acting, thinking being?

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### **ePhilippians37 – March 27 – the secret of contentment**

*I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me; you were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want (Philippians 4:10-12).*

Paul, unjustly charged and stuck in a dark stone prison cell, Paul simply refuses to complain – not because griping is bad manners, or even because it would just be no use, but because he is "content." He knows the "secret" of having or not having, comfort or duress. "Paul is preaching not self-sufficiency, but God-sufficiency" ([Witherington](#)).

Do you hear the echo of Psalm 23? "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." We do want, we buy, we consume – but the person close to God lowers his wanting threshold, and just doesn't look around at what I don't have but wish I had. The Christian is content. The Christian is grateful. The Christian isn't thrown off balance by any thing out there.

In the Greco-Roman world, [Stoics](#) cared little about outward circumstances. But Paul is not in league with them. The Stoic, feeling nothing really matters, detaches himself emotionally in resignation. Paul is never detached; Paul always believes he can do something, and make a difference – but his contentment isn't gritting his teeth and finding some mood within. Contentment depends upon God; contentment is a precious gift God gives.

Notice he says "I have learned to be content." We are not wired with some native ability to be content; it is learned, taught by God in the cauldron of experience.

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### **ePhilippians36 – March 26 – surrounded in beauty**

*Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:8-9).*

Robert Hughes wrote insightfully about the [Culture of Complaint](#) in which we live. Political campaigns, relationships, reactions to schools, government, and the guy cutting you off in traffic – all causes of rancor, and we harbor suspicion about everything and everybody.

But Paul suggests that having the mind of Christ requires another mental posture; if we are to have any chance for joy, it will never come if we seek out reasons to carp and grouse. The Christian is one who focuses on what is true and honorable, who delights in justice and purity, who notices the lovely and gracious, appreciates and strives for excellence. We praise; we encourage; we choose to think on the good. [Jewel's](#) best lyric goes like this:

It doesn't take talent to be mean  
Please be careful with me  
I'm sensitive, and I'd like to stay that way.  
I have this theory that if we're told we're bad  
Then that's the only idea we'll ever have  
But maybe if we are surrounded in beauty  
Some day we will become what we see.

The beauty that is everywhere was crystallized and definitively embodied in Jesus, who is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, and worthy of praise.

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### **ePhilippians35 – March 23 – peace**

*And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 4:7).

The Roman emperor boasted that he was the guarantor of peace, the [pax romana](#). But how did he keep the peace? By wielding a bigger sword than anybody else. If you marshal enough well-drilled troops with clashing armor, you get peace – right? Or was [Dorothee Soelle](#) right? “Armed people have no peace.”

God's peace is never won when the vanquished cower before threatening spears, or when everybody in the house walks on eggshells, fearing the one who demands on peace at home. God's peace is a gift, it lifts up and ennobles the weakest, it delivers justice and hope; God's peace is all love, compassion and that curious strength that embraces rather than strikes.

How intriguing that Paul dictates out loud, with the emperor's Praetorian guard listening through the bars, that God's peace will “keep” your hearts: the Greek word means to “guard.” Paul is in prison, guarded by men with weapons; but who's really free, and who isn't? In God's hidden script, it's the armed soldiers, and the emperor himself, who are not free but are in chains, while Paul is free as a bird, protected from them by the peace of God.

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### **ePhilippians34 – March 22 – have no anxiety**

*Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God* (Philippians 4:6).

The least obeyed commandment in the Bible? Could it be “Have no anxiety”? Jesus urged the same thing upon his disciples (Matthew 6:25). We are an inwardly shaky people, riddled with anxiety... and we'd like to wave a wand and change the world that seems bent on heightening our anxiety.

Have no anxiety? But how? “Let your requests be made known to God.” Not that God is some kind of machine that dispenses goodies if we press the right spiritual button. We open up to God, we share our hearts with God; our lives become so hinged to God that every concern, every interest, every moment, each thought, the breath I am taking right now, the last laugh, the ache down deep – like a child on God's lap we just tell it all, and feel God's embrace. The anxiety subsides, not merely because we've unloaded it, but because we've handed it to God who's “got the whole world in his hands.”

“Let your requests be made known to God” – but not with a demanding sense of entitlement. “With thanksgiving let your requests be made known...” Paul must be mixed up: it’s supposed to be we file our requests, and if God complies, then we give thanks – right? No, “with thanksgiving let your requests be made known.” We begin with [gratitude](#). Jesus invited the crowd to be rid of anxiety by pointing to the birds of the air, and the lilies of the field: they are arrayed in beauty, God provides for them (read [Matthew 6:25-34!](#)). Notice what God has done, feel the blessings you neglected to pay attention to (which is probably why you got into the anxious mess you’re in...). Could it be that gratitude is the antidote to anxiety?

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### **ePhilippians33 – March 21 – choose joy**

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand* (Philippians 4:4-5).

In the worst prison cell, Paul’s heart sings with “joy” – and the Christians in Philippi would recall how Paul was [imprisoned](#) in their own city, and the jailer had to silence him for singing songs of joy at midnight (Acts 16:25).

Americans cherish their right to “the pursuit of happiness.” But no one needs to be told that all our endless rounds of fun, our diversions, our pursuit of happiness, no matter how successful, prove to be nothing more than a silly dance around a gaping hollow place in our souls. God made us for joy, which is deeper than happiness, or maybe different entirely from happiness and fun. Joy isn’t happiness times two, or a really tall pile of fun.

Joy may actually seem a bit goofy or maladaptive in a world where advertisers press you incessantly to want more, for joy is already satisfied. Joy is at peace, calm in the face of bad luck. Joy knows that we are not exposed to random happenings, for we are nestled quite securely in God’s loving hand; we rejoice “in the Lord,” not in my achievements. Joy can weather unhappiness; joy is wedded to “forebearance.” Joy is frequently discovered in the middle of sorrow.

In one sense, we choose joy. Stumbling upon a fork in the road, we can choose joy, or choose to be resentful. And yet the very choice of joy is a gift of the Spirit, who is forever coaxing me toward joy. When joy pokes its surprising head into my life, I know I could not have won this myself. Joy gets barricaded from my heart by sin, by pride, by my sense of self-entitlement. That barricade must be torn down, by confession, by humility, by a profound sense of gratitude for even the smallest little gift I might have taken for granted five minutes earlier.

Like all fruit, joy requires time, tending, maturity. [Evelyn Underhill](#) notes that “it is rather immature to be upset about the weather... Pursuing the spiritual course, we must expect fog, cold, persistent cloudiness, gales, and sudden stinging hail, as well as the sun.” Joy is about consistency in the spiritual life. Since joy is different from the emotion of happiness, then joy does not evaporate when God seems absent. Joy knows God is incapable of drifting away from us, and the very fact that we turn our heads and grope after God in the dark is God’s gift that gives birth to joy.

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### **ePhilippians32 – March 20 – beloved**

*Therefore, my brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. And I ask you also, true yokefellow, help these women, for they have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life* (Philippians 4:1-3).

How tender is Paul’s language? Where else but in the Church do you get called “beloved”? Henri Nouwen’s book, [Life of the Beloved](#), articulates God’s hopeful message for each of us who live a world where “beloved” doesn’t compute.

Paul and the Philippians share love – but their love isn't spontaneous affection, or the fact that they think alike or enjoy leisure activities together. It is Christ who is their [friendship](#), who cements their relationship; it is Christ they share, and their zeal for the present work and future hope of the kingdom of God.

Many Christian bodies fret over what role [women](#) should play in church leadership – but Paul apparently did not. Women in the region of Philippi, in ancient times, had considerable prominence and influence. Euodia and Syntyche are clearly leaders, not the seamstresses or cooks, of the church. Ben [Witherington](#) asks, "What sort of woman had the time, resources or freedom to struggle side by side with Paul on behalf of the gospel? Women of status are likely candidates, and perhaps single women or more well-to-do women with considerable power in their own families who could count on their servants to take care of most of the domestic responsibilities."

Who is Clement? and the rest of the workers? We do not know, but since their names are written in the 'book of life,' God knows their names, who they are, and more about them than they ever knew about themselves!

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### **ePhilippians31 – March 19 – glorious body**

We await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:21).

In my book, [The Life We Claim: The Apostles' Creed](#), I tried to clarify what this "glorious body" is about:

When we speak of the resurrection, we do not mean that Jesus' soul survived the death of his body, and yet we do not mean the mere resuscitation of a corpse. The risen Jesus is not recognized, but then is recognizable. He can be touched, but then he pulls back. He materializes, and then he vanishes. Paul spoke of the resurrection as involving a "spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15). A body, yes, but spiritual, not merely a spirit, but a body, totally transformed, animated entirely by the Spirit, not liable to disease or death. So for those whose understanding of anatomy makes a resuscitation seem ridiculous, the Bible narrates something different, and far better – better even than the immortality of the soul. The Bible promises the resurrection of spiritual bodies.

God's stunning generosity toward us involves not just the soul or some invisible interior self. The human body is intricately woven by God, fashioned as a marvel – and yet that body breaks down: we age, we ache, our shoulders stoop, aches set in, arthritis cripples, disease ravages, and in unpleasant ways we finally lose the battle with death. Even on our healthiest, most agile days, the body rebels and serves sin rather than God.

This "lowly body" has a better destiny, though: the body will itself be redeemed, and so what we do with the body is an anticipation and preparation for glory. And so now, the body, flawed as it may be, can become God's [temple](#) on earth, the place where we meet God, where God is exhibited to the world.

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### **ePhilippians30 – March 16 – citizenship**

*But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:20).*

Citizens of [Philippi](#) took great pride, as settled military veterans, in their membership in the commonwealth that was the Roman empire. For Christians, their true commonwealth was in heaven: it was to God's kingdom that they ultimately belonged, that elicited their passion and loyalty. Try as they might to straddle both worlds, they discovered you have to make a choice, a big choice but also a lot of little choices – just as we do as Christians who belong to heaven but are pressed to get too enmeshed in the habits and ideals of our culture.

What a challenge – to thrive in our identity as people of faith in a world that does not love the Lord Jesus. For we live in anticipation of something that has peeked out from behind the veil but is not fully revealed: our mood is one of waiting, longing, like a watchman in the guard tower eagerly scanning the horizon for the coming of the Savior.

And not any pretend Savior! As [Witherington](#) explains, the emperor was increasingly regarded as “Savior,” and the blessings he was expected to deliver were safety, wealth, and health – blessings for the upper echelon of society! “Paul was offering a very different sort of savior, one who was for everyone, even those in the lowest status in society, even slaves.”

And how unlike other so-called, would-be saviors, like the Caesar, Pilate, Herod, the power brokers of the political world, who wield sword and shield. Jesus consorted with the poor, touched the untouchables, allowed himself to be bullied and bruised – all to carry us with him to our destination, our commonwealth in which we vest ourselves now: heaven.

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### **ePhilippians29 – March 15 – enemies of the cross**

*For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things* (Philippians 3:18-19).

How odd for Paul to speak of religious, spiritual people who claim to follow Christ as “enemies of the cross”! Back then, Paul saw grave danger in those who believed Christianity was all about the mustering of good deeds. Today we are more laid back, presuming upon God’s indulgence.

Perhaps today the grave danger is a Christianity that is all feeling, all emotion. People base faith on what they feel – as transient, moody and unreliable as feelings can be!

Isn’t Paul describing us? “Their god is their belly, their glory is shame.” We are first and foremost consumers: we buy, we eat, we collect, we shop more, we drink more, and it’s all about me, how I feel, my sense of fulfillment. We even enlist God to help us consume, to feel full – but can’t we see how our minds are really stuck on “earthly things”?

What once was shameful we now glorify: the “seven deadly sins” (greed, gluttony, sloth, lust, anger, envy and pride) now describe the good life in America! We fantasize about and are intrigued by what is shameful – because we’re after a rush of feeling, a higher high. But God isn’t a feeling more titillating than any other: God is a stable rock enduring every oscillation of feeling. God you cannot buy or consume. God calls me out of self-indulgence, away from it being all about me, and into the adventure of God, far grander than me and my small satisfactions.

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### **ePhilippians28 - March 14 – eye on the prize**

*Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; 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. Let those of us who are mature be thus minded; and if in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us* (Philippians 3:13-17).

Paul witnessed the public, athletic games in ancient cities, where men flexed their muscles, flashed their prowess, and dashed competitively. The “goal” (Greek = skopos) was the marker at the finish line: the best runners focused on that mark. As any good coach will tell you, leave the past behind and keep your vision rapt on the climax, the victory.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” not “Blessed are those who are righteous” (Matthew 5:6). The beauty is in the [hungering](#), in the yearning. The nagging hankering we feel inside is God’s voice, calling us home, keeping us a bit “restless until we find rest in God” (St. Augustine).

[Gregory of Nyssa](#) (4th century) wrote eloquently of the way God gives us just a tantalizing taste of God’s presence, a

hazy glimpse of God's utter beauty, only to draw us forward as if we were still straining to see for the first time. For Gregory, true satisfaction "consists in constantly going on in the quest, seeing that every fulfillment continually generates a further desire... Far from making the soul despair, this is actually an experience of God's fuller presence. Yearning fills the soul more fully than actual possession."

This is maturity! Knowing you don't possess God, but pressing relentlessly onward, delighting in the quest.

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## **ePhilippians 27 - March 13 – setting goals**

*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own* (Philippians 3:12).

What is the "this" Paul hasn't obtained, the "it" Paul presses toward to "make it my own"? Rewind through verses 9-11: Paul's goal is the total effect of being found in Christ, knowing him, the power of his resurrection, and suffering with him.

We think it's a good idea to set goals, to envision our life's mission. But Paul does not set a goal or dream a personal dream: his goal is established by God, defined by God, and Paul's achievement of his goal rests entirely in God's hands, not Paul's! Paul presses on – but it's the way a hungry man presses on through the line for the food that awaits, the way a young lover presses on to put his arms around the one he's longed for but missed for some time. Yes, I make Christ my own, but really it is a spontaneous reflex to the larger wonder that Christ made me his own!

Perfection isn't required – although Paul sounds as if he's not satisfied with less! The Greek word (*teleios*) does not mean a life that grades out at 100 with correct behavior on every rule. Rather, the word implies reaching the goal, accomplishing the objective, reframing your life repeatedly until it is what it should be – the way you "perfect" a motion in parliamentary procedure.

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## **ePhilippians 26 – March 12 – two graces**

...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:10-11).

How mind-boggling! Paul wants to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection," and so do you and I. But Paul also wants to "share his sufferings" – not be spared suffering because of Christ, but actually to suffer not for but with Christ! Spiritual giants can show us the way to a deep love for Jesus that is so hinged to Jesus that we want to be as close to him as possible, that we want to know not just the resurrection but also the immense love in that hour when he exhibited the heart of God most profoundly.

St. Francis prayed before a cross, "My Lord Jesus Christ, Two graces I ask of you before I die: the first is that in my life I may feel, in my soul and body, as far as possible, that sorrow which you, tender Jesus, underwent in the hour of your most bitter passion; the second is that I may feel in my heart, as far as possible, the abundance of love with which you, son of God, were inflamed, so as willingly to undergo such a great passion for us sinners."

Can we seek even small measures of suffering with Christ? If you don't feel close to God, maybe you need to hear what [Mother Teresa](#) said: "You must give what will cost you something. This is giving not just what you can live without, but what you can't live without or don't want to live without. Something you really like. Then your gift becomes a sacrifice which will have value before God. This giving until it hurts, this sacrifice is what I call love in action."

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## **ePhilippians25 – March 9 – gaining Christ**

*For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Philippians 3:8-9).*

Trying to whet his listener's appetite for the kingdom of God, Jesus painted a pair of memorable images: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it (Matthew 13:44-46).

Jesus senses our hesitation, the way we get tentative and hold back; we calculate, we play it safe and never leap. Is it because we are contriving to maintain total control over my life and not risk handing the steering over to anybody else, including God? Or do we simply not understand the magnificence, the wonder, the glorious beauty of what God is literally dying to give us?

We search for the one pearl – but if I am blessed, I do not find it so much as it finds me! To all of us whom our culture trains to be subservient to nobody, productive and not dependent, we blush at the passive verbs the Bible uses to describe life with God. I am "found" in him. I do not "find" God. What I do is I flee from God, I mosey about as if there were no God. But God is what the poet Francis Thompson called "the Hound of Heaven": "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days... I hid from Him." But "with deliberate speed, majestic instancy, came on the following Feet" of God who never stops finding us.

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## **ePhilippians24 – March 8 – my richest gain**

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3:7-8).

Paul talks like an accountant with a ledger here – until you read between the lines and feel the harrowing heartbreak. Paul lost – everything? Property, yes, potential for making money, yes, but also "he lost his Jewish friends, his high status, and perhaps his wife" (Ben Witherington). Most of the early Christians suffered financially, because they refused to strike deals at pagan temples, and no longer curtsied to the emperor's claim to total devotion. Families were ripped apart: husbands dispensed with wives who converted, Christian children were disinherited by parents. Nero burned Christians as torches in his garden.

We like to think of Christianity as a good investment, a gain above the good life we already have. But the stakes are higher than that, it costs you something to follow. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote eloquently of The Cost of Discipleship. But we could just as wisely speak of the cost of non-discipleship! The real losers are those who cling to what the world values and never know Christ, who think that can grab on to both. But a choice must be made, and those who believe in Christ understand Isaac Watts's hymn:

When I survey the wondrous cross,  
on which the Prince of Glory died,  
my richest gain I count but loss  
and pour contempt on all my pride.  
Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast  
save in the death of Christ my Lord.  
All the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them to his blood.

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## **ePhilippians23 – March 7 – bragging rights**

*Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, the tribe Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless (Philippians 3:4-6).*

When Paul denounces the kind of Christianity that requires diligent adherence to the laws of Judaism, he's not speaking as a loser whose life wasn't up to standards. He immodestly boasts of his rigorous obedience, declaring that his holiness can top anybody's. In 2 Corinthians 11 we read an even longer, bombastic tirade in which Paul thumps his chest – but then turns the triviality of it all on its head with his pivotal thought: "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Corinthians 11:30).

Paul is not tortured by the throes of guilt or a sense of inadequacy – the kind of agony that plagued Martin Luther. The bright shining of God's grace puts all our achievements, all our good-deed-doing in the shade. To those who have been moved in their hearts by the immense love of Christ, we boast not in any good we have done, but ironically enough in our weakness.

Paul does not encourage us to build on our strengths – because it is God's strength that matters! Amazing grace saves – not the nice or above average person but "a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." So it is my lostness, my blindness, that is my hope. My wounds, my mindless foibles, my past littered with mistakes and confusion, are the arenas of God's glory. Only the sinner deeply grieved by his waywardness understands the grace of God.

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## **ePhilippians22 – March 6 – dogs**

*Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not irksome to me, and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:1-3).*

Diversity of belief was not a matter of enlightened appreciation for Paul. Getting the nuances of the faith correct was so important that Paul jettisons his kind demeanor and blasts those who seduced Christians with a false version of Christianity. He calls them "dogs" – which would be flattery around my house, the way our corgi gets treated! But in the Roman world, and especially in Judaism, dogs were undesirable. Barking, biting, growling, napping all day, mangy, scavenging the trash heap for food. Jews thought of dogs as unclean.

Why does Paul call his opponents "dogs"? and since they were Christians who professed faith in Jesus, why was he so bent out of shape with them? Evidently, in Philippi missionaries showed up who believed you must also become Jewish to follow Christ, to adhere assiduously to the [laws of the Old Testament](#): eating kosher, observing the calendar, and practicing circumcision. These zealots for cleanliness Paul calls unclean!

Paul is not against the laws, or cleanliness, or even circumcision: he had Timothy circumcised! But he rages against the notion that adherence to any regulation is a prerequisite for entrance into the Christian faith. We may say, "If anybody deserves to go to heaven it's Fred" – but no one "deserves," and not merely because we aren't good enough. Jesus died for us, and the need for his crucifixion is nullified if we can pile up a mountain of good deeds (or at least good intentions!) and qualify for heaven. Love never earns. Love can only respond to love with love. "Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all" (Isaac Watts)

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## ePhilippians21 – March 5 – a soldier healed

*I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy; and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete your service to me (Philippians 2:25-30).*

Paul calls Epaphroditus a “fellow soldier”; incarcerated by Rome’s [Praetorian Guard](#), and writing to [Philippi](#), a colony of military veterans, Paul saw Epaphroditus as a different kind of soldier. “[Onward, Christian soldiers](#), marching as to war with the cross of Jesus going on before.”

Paul’s friends in Philippi dispatched Epaphroditus to bring gifts to Paul in prison: in a Roman jail you’d starve to death if friends and family didn’t arrive with the bare necessities. The trip would have taken a couple of weeks – and during that arduous journey Epaphroditus had fallen sick and nearly died.

But “God had mercy on him.” What does Paul mean? Did Epaphroditus simply get better, the way I get over the flu? Or was the healing miraculous, explainable only by divine intervention?

And notice that Paul says God’s mercy wasn’t just for the one who was healed, but also for Paul, the one who loves the one healed. The sick person needs God’s help, but then so does the husband or wife, child or friend who watches by the bedside.

Whether the healing was a miracle or something more routine, the survival of Epaphroditus isn’t just for his own sake. His continuing life is for the benefit of the Church and its mission. Can we think of our own existence, not as just something for me to enjoy, but as a gift of God for the work of God’s kingdom? When we pray for healing, might we ask for the person to return to health, not just so he can exist, so we can have her around, but so God might be glorified, and so that the one who sticks around can be used in the labor of the Body of Christ?

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## ePhilippians20 – March 2 – supporting actor

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare. They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy’s worth you know, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me; and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself shall come also (Philippians 2:19-24).

Timothy could win the New Testament’s “best supporting actor” award. He appears repeatedly in the stories of Acts and in Paul’s letters, and we even have two letters in the Bible with his name attached. His mother, Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5) was Jewish, but his father was a Gentile (Acts 16:2). Timothy traveled with Paul, preached, led – and [Gordon Fee](#) thinks he was Paul’s secretary, taking dictation.

If so, then we can imagine Timothy blushing when Paul says “I have no one like him... As a son with a father he has served me.” In the ancient world, sons generally took on the occupations of their fathers. We think of Jesus laboring as a carpentry apprentice to his father, Joseph. Paul is like that father, Timothy his apprentice in the faith. Perhaps we need to find someone wise in God to whom we might attach ourselves in an apprenticeship – or even to dare to be the teacher, the “father,” and guide others who are newer in the things of God, in the life of faith, in marriage, in parenting, in exercising ethics in the workplace.

How fascinating that Paul needs Timothy as much as Timothy needs him, and how much the Christians in Philippi need them both, and they need them! God does not raise up solo Christians, and no leader is a lone ranger celebrity. We are all part of the [Body](#) of Christ, dependent upon each other, finding our calling and purpose in the family of faith, never by ourselves.

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## **ePhilippians19 – March 1 - poured**

Even if I am to be poured as a libation 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 (Philippians 2:17-18).

In the late 1970's, [Oscar Romero](#) became archbishop in El Salvador. Considered the "safe" choice, the government's favorite, the one they assumed would be easily coddled and not stir up any trouble, he woke up when his friend, the priest Rutilio Grande, was brutally murdered. Romero became an outspoken advocate for the people, condemning governmental oppression in no uncertain terms. He was awarded a Swiss prize for peace, and signed his award money over to a hospital for indigent cancer patients.

Knowing his assassination was imminent, he told a Mexican reporter, "My life has been threatened many times. As a Christian I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people. God assisted the martyrs, and I will feel him very close when I offer him my last breath. More important than the moment of death is giving him all of life and living for him. If God accepts the sacrifice of my life, my hope is that my blood will be like a seed of liberty and a sign that our hopes will soon become reality."

While saying Mass, just as he was lifting up the body and blood of the Christ he loved and served, he was shot in the chest. The Scripture reading had been John 12:23, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains only a grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." Romero's death did just that, as did the death of Jesus, and of Paul – and so we begin to comprehend the strangeness of Paul's urgent plea to his friends to rejoice in his imprisonment and impending death.

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## **ePhilippians18 – February 28 – splendid torch**

*Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain (Philippians 2:14-16).*

The ancient Israelites, miraculously delivered from bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt, did not wander in the wilderness for long before they began to grumble, to "murmur" (Exodus 15-16). They questioned Moses, and God, stupidly wishing they could return to a life of servitude instead of weathering the hardships of freedom.

Conversion to Christianity, or a deepening of a long-standing faith, is not the end to all your troubles: you simply trade old problems in for a new, unfamiliar, more staggering set of challenges. Do we grumble? When we exhibit a grumpy, critical attitude, what are we saying to the world about the value of faith? When we harbor a negative spirit even in the privacy of our own minds, what poisons are we releasing that kill the soul?

Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

[George Bernard Shaw](#), in advancing age, wrote these wise words: "This is the true joy in life, being used for a mighty purpose, instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. Life is no 'brief candle' for me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

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## **ePhilippians17 – February 27 – work out your salvation**

*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure* (Philippians 2:12-13).

This extended sentence of astonishing wisdom raises two intriguing issues for us. (1) Paul speaks of “obedience” – not to God, but to friends in the Church! Through most of the history of Christianity, serious believers have been happy to submit themselves to others in the Church, to be told their faults, to be taught the truth, in grateful humility to accept demands and reprimands. Today no one would have any desire to “obey” – and no one would expect obedience; we do not wish to be told what to think or do. But spiritual masters, St. Francis, Luther, or Mother Teresa, insisted that someone be over them, correct them, teach them. Is the Church better off leaving everybody on their own?

(2) “Work out your salvation... for God is at work in you.” Is my salvation something I do, a status I achieve by being good, by piling up labors for God, or avoiding moral missteps? Isn’t salvation something God does for me, and in me? “For by grace you are saved through faith; this is not your doing, it is the gift of God, not because of works” (Ephesians 2:8).

There is a mystery, a paradox that puzzles us and yet sets us free: you labor as diligently as you can, you strive valiantly for God – and then if you manage to produce something good for God, you recognize that it was God working in you, in spite of you. “Not I, but Christ in me” (Galatians 2:20). And this isn’t some spiritual fiction: to those saved by the mercy of God, who understand their radical dependence upon God, it is the simple, glorious truth.

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## **ePhilippians16 – February 26 – real Christians**

Christ Jesus became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, 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 (Philippians 2:8-11).

Paul was imprisoned in Rome, in a cell down a mere alley or two from the palace of the august emperor of Rome. To foster unity in the empire, and to induce citizens to yield passively to the will of the empire, the reigning Caesar was touted as a god on earth, and all people were required to bow down in public to his image, at the very sound of his name.

Christians refused, and many paid for it with their lives. One government official complained to the emperor that, while many followers of Christ would disavow Christ to spare their necks, “real Christians” could not be compelled to do so. They were not being stubborn or heroic: they expressed with their bodies the truth of the universe. If Christ is Lord, then Caesar isn’t.

Christians do not squander their allegiance on any competitors, they permit no usurpers to take God’s place in their hearts or habits. In our day you aren’t likely to be burned at the stake for faith in Christ, but you can lose your soul if you fawn over any other fake gods, whether it’s a career or a celebrity, the things you buy or another person, any government or power on this planet.

And why? At the end of time, one name, and only one name, will command total devotion, will be fully loved and adored, worshipped as truth and ultimate worth and beauty.

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## **ePhilippians15 – February 23 – he humbled himself**

Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7-8).

“Where is the glittering crown of his Godhead? The humility of the flesh covers the divine majesty like a curtain” ([Karl Barth](#)). A noisy chorus of critics, getting rich with books like *The DaVinci Code*, act as if they are exposing some unheard of truth that Jesus was only human. That was exactly what God intended: that Jesus would take on, not some glowing angelic specter, but the form of a servant, born just like you and me, even suffering a gruesome death. Onlookers concluded he was just a man. This is the Gospel: God loved us enough to become who we are – so we will, on the other side of history, become what God is.

He emptied himself, he humbled himself. We can be sure Rome, with its clanging armor, swords and opulence, thought they humbled him. But it was Jesus' choice, not an accident. The world saw Roman might clamping down on one more victim. “But it was God's will to bruise him” (Isaiah 53:10). [Stephen Fowl](#) explains why this matters: “If Christ's life was freely offered up in obedience, then although Rome can take his life, Rome cannot make Christ its victim. Ironically, they become the unwitting agents in God's plan of salvation... On the cross, Christ's body becomes the place where Rome's pretensions are overwhelmed by the power of God.”

Rome and all powers are exposed, but then so is death itself. Why did Christ die? Death had to be defeated from the inside. We who die never die alone, but in the company of God's own Son – and God carries us then on the tide of his resurrection to eternal life. What better way for God to save us?

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## **ePhilippians14 – February 22 – emptied**

*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 emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men* (Philippians 2:5-7).

Adam and Eve let themselves get snookered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden, who seductively dangled the lure that “you will be like God” (Genesis 3:5). Precisely what we want: to be the center of everything, to achieve total control, to get my way – and precisely our crushing demise. I am not God, can't be, needn't be – and my ruin is when I try to vaunt myself and usurp God's place.

The antidote for us who share their folly? Jesus, who was God, didn't seize the fruit but let it go, to bring us home to God. Christ left his celestial glory and took on the form of a servant, a slave, the only way God could release us who have enslaved ourselves to our own self-absorbed unwillingness to let God be God.

“A thing to be grasped”: the Greek word *harpagmos* means something you seize for your own advantage, the spoils of the victor. Fans of *The Lord of the Rings* will recognize the seductive allure but horrific peril of the ring of power. The world, like the serpent, urges us to grab, hang on, secure, collect... But Christ Jesus didn't grasp, he emptied himself, and our kinship with him deepens when we empty, refuse to grasp, and divest. Generosity really will save us.

[Frederick Buechner](#) pointed out that we live our lives like a clenched fist – which can do many things: fight, work, cling. But the clenched fist can never accept a helping hand. In Christ, God reaches down to us with an open hand to save us. Christ emptied himself, to help us, and also to show us his true heart.

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## ePhilippians13 – February 21 – unselfishness? or love?

*Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus... (Philippians 2:3-5).*

Lent begins today: a season of repentance. But is repentance merely regret? a determination to avoid selfishness? As a child I was repeatedly told, “Don’t be selfish” – as if this were bad manners, a juvenile mood I should wean myself from in order to grow up. Yet advertisers pepper us with messages urging us to be selfish, very selfish. But then there’s Jesus, and the Church urging me to be unselfish again... My innate instincts press me toward self-preservation – and shouldn’t I want what is best for me?

Isn’t there a paradox in the dilemma? In his most brilliant sermon, C.S. Lewis observed that “if you asked twenty good men today what they thought the highest of the virtues, nineteen would reply, Unselfishness. But if you asked any of the great Christians of old he would have replied, Love. You see what has happened? A negative has been substituted for a positive... as if abstinence and not happiness was the important point. If we consider the unblushing promises and the staggering rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us.” Repentance is driven by love, a turn from failure to love to a strong love for God.

Don’t be selfish – which is the best thing you can desire for yourself! “Look to the interests of others” – which is humility. Other people do not exist to meet my needs, but so I might help them discover their true selves, as I discover my best self. I count the other person, no matter how rich, poor, noble or annoying “as better than myself” – a challenging spiritual discipline. The goal is that we become like Christ, we have his mind in us, we see situations and people as he sees them... and that is all love, all joy.

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## ePhilippians12 – February 20 – encouragement

*So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind (Philippians 2:1-2).*

Philippians 2, one of the most profound and beautiful passages in all of Scripture, begins with a tantalizing If! If there is encouragement? There isn’t much out there... and the other three comforts Paul mentions are what we crave and need desperately: the solace of love (not the fiery combustion of love), affection and sympathy (which can also be translated “compassion and mercy”).

But where Christ is, where Christ takes on vitality in our lives, the If is answered. There is encouragement – and we encourage. There is the solace of love – and we love. There is compassion, there is mercy.

How shocking is Paul’s plea that we be “of the same mind, of one mind.” We feel we are free to think and believe as we wish. We like to croon, “I did it my way.” If anything, we relish the chance to seethe over the other person’s flawed thinking.

But Paul says we must be of one mind. In fact, the failure to be of one mind is the barrier to joy. Joy is being of one mind – so joy requires me to have an open mind, to listen, to respect the other person, to notice the lovely work God is doing in that person, to lavish mercy (for Christ surely has mercy on him!), to have a common point of reference, which is the truth of the Gospel – but also our determination to love, to be one.

“Truth and love are wings that cannot be separated. Without love, truth cannot fly; without truth, love cannot soar” (St. Ephrem).

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## **ePhilippians11 – February 19 – worthy**

*Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear omen to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine (Philippians 1:27-30).*

One and only one thing matters: "Let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel." How infrequently do we think about this! We measure our worth by our property value, size of our portfolio, corporate position, pace of fun and consumption... Is my life "worthy" of what Christ has done for us?

Part of the worthy life is being of "one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel." Although I might prefer it, Christ does not permit me to go off and be pious by myself, to insulate myself in some solo spirituality. I must connect with others. Christ died and saved me to be a part of his Body, the Church. Are you striving with others for the faith of the Gospel? Or are you just too busy? too caught up in your own agenda?

To strive for the faith will feel like conflict with the world. We are citizens of a counter-culture – but do we act as if we are? How many Christians, and churches, lead innocuous lives, blending seamlessly into the landscape? Could it be that, until we follow Jesus closely enough to provoke hostility, we will never know courage, hope and joy?

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## **ePhilippians10 – February 16 – desire to depart**

*I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again (Philippians 1:23-26).*

Yesterday we spoke of the Lord being magnified in our bodies. What about in the hour of death? At his age, and in the prison cell of Rome, Paul knew he was perilously close to death. But he wanted to die a good death that would somehow be a credit to God.

In our society, death is such a terror, something we just don't talk about – and so we deny our mortality, and lose all chance of dying well. We go to extreme measures to prolong life – understandably! But then the dying never get to say goodbye, to bless family left behind, to glorify God.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux lived just 23 years. Frail in health, her keen awareness of the fragility of life wrought in her a remarkable intimacy with God. She grew eager to die, praying that God might take her without delay into his eternal embrace so that "I may be able to tell you of my love eternally face to face."

To die of love is what I hope for,  
on fire with his love I want to be,  
to see him, be one with him forever,  
that is my heaven – that's my destiny.

This readiness, even eagerness to die changes how we look at life now. I am less likely to be greedy, or cautious. I am generous, I love freely. I live for others, not for myself. Paul did not say "to remain in the flesh is good for me," but "for me to remain is helpful for you." To live for others, and so for God, is joy.

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## **ePhilippians9 - February 15 – magnified in my body**

*Yes, and I shall rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell (Philippians 1:19-22).*

Paul does not mind if he is disgraced, as long as Christ is honored – or “magnified” (which is the meaning of the Greek verb megaluno in verse 20). When Mary was pregnant with Jesus, she visited Elizabeth, and sang an eloquent song: “My soul magnifies the Lord” (Luke 1:46). Do I magnify the Lord? If a magnifying glass were held up to my life, would God’s reputation be enlarged in viewer’s eyes? Or shrunk down or hidden? Would I be ashamed?

Paul’s prayer is that the Lord be magnified in his body. Too often we think of our faith as something spiritual, invisible, an emotion, an event in the soul. But the body is what matters: what do I do with my body? What do I put into it? Where does it go? Do I use my hands, my face, my back, my legs, to magnify the Lord? Your body is “the temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

“If we are called to magnify Christ in our bodies, in the face of all the forces seeking to exert control over us, then we must be as intentional about all aspects of our life as Paul was. The desires we manifest, our patterns of consumption, the ways we get, hold and distribute wealth, can all be occasions where either we are disgraced, or Christ is magnified” (Stephen Fowl).

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## **ePhilippians8 - February 14 – envy and rivalry**

*Some preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice (Philippians 1:15-18).*

When we hear about ugly tension inside denominations, or when we discover that somebody who pretended to proclaim the Gospel was really bilking adherents, we realize there is “nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). From the beginning, Christians have found ways to argue, to vaunt themselves as superior to other Christians; some have used the Gospel to turn a profit, to wrap hypocrisy in the mantle of piety.

We labor diligently to insure that truth is being taught, to prevent pretenders from fleecing people, and to coordinate the efforts of churches, pastors and denominations so we are working together instead of competing or being redundant - but the fact is, “the proclamation of the true Word does not require a perfect messenger” (Ben Witherington).

Paul, so obsessed with getting the truth about Christ exactly right, surprises us by rejoicing that “whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed.” Could it be he held such a high view of Christ, that he trusted the power and truth of Christ to mount his own defense and to be persuasive?

At times I’m bewildered by the immense popularity of the books attacking Christ and the Church, The DaVinci Code being only the best known. But the good news is that Jesus is still being talked about, that he matters enough to be ridiculed by a hysterical opposition, and so we may take comfort that the power of Jesus finds curious confirmation even in the words of those who profit from belittling him...

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## ePhilippians7 - February 13 – something worth dying for

*I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment, and are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear (Philippians 1:12-14).*

A paradox: when our faith is attacked, and a harassed minority risks everything for it, Christianity thrives, and grows. But when the Church is at ease, when being a Christian is like having a pulse, then faith evaporates, and is trivialized.

Paul is in jail – but “far from being put out of commission, he has been placed by God at a strategic place so that he can witness to those close to the emperor” ([Ben Witherington](#)). The [Praetorian guard](#) was the elite band of soldiers at the emperor’s personal disposal. What they learned was that this prisoner was not behind bars for being evil, but because of his devotion to a peaceful Messiah who did not kill anybody, but sacrificed himself – and allegedly didn’t stay dead long.

A whole chapter of my [book on saints and heroes](#) is devoted to prisoners, those whose most powerful witness was not when they were freely roaming about, but when they were incarcerated, even awaiting death. When [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#) was in a Nazi concentration camp, inmates and the armed guards were moved by his devotion to God. The camp physician declared “In the almost fifty years I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.”

What the world is looking for isn’t more lazy decadence, but a commitment that costs something. [Martin Luther King](#) told Christians in Alabama, “I can’t promise you that it won’t get you beaten. I can’t promise you that it won’t get your home bombed. I can’t promise you won’t get scarred up a bit – but we must stand up for what is right. If you haven’t discovered something that is worth dying for, you haven’t found anything worth living for.”

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## ePhilippians6 - February 12 – teach us to pray

*It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:9-11).*

The disciples came to Jesus and asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Did Paul’s listeners ever ask him to do the same? Pray! – but how? and for what? People say, “I am praying for you” – and what a lovely gift! But what is your prayer? What is its content, its purpose, its dream? I keep a treasured prayer in my desk from my father-in-law, who wrote down what his daily prayer for me actually is.

Paul teaches us to pray “that love may abound more and more.” Generally we think you either love or you don’t. Paul urges us to seek an increase in love – for friends! And not just in volume, or intensity, but in quality, and practical effectiveness. Love, for Paul, isn’t a mood or a titillating emotion, but a habit, action, a commitment.

Do you notice how Paul connects love with knowledge, discernment, excellence, purity? “The love, prayer, knowledge and wisdom needed to live faithful lives are not separable components... but a set of interconnected habits that we must cultivate over a lifetime. Growth in one of these habits will lead to growth in the others. Failure in one will manifest itself in a more comprehensive failure” ([Stephen Fowl](#)).

In Galatians 5:22, Paul spoke of “the [fruit](#) of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control.” We do not grit our teeth and try harder for love, discernment, purity and excellence to abound. Work strive, but we let the Spirit do its work in us. We are to be fruitful, the way a tree bears fruit, simply by being what we

were made to be, letting God do his fruit-bearing through us.

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## **ePhilippians5 - February 9 – defense of the Gospel**

*It is right for me to feel thus about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:7-8).*

When Paul speaks of how he “feels,” we should be cautious. Feelings drive everything for us. But Paul uses the Greek verb, *phronein*, which means “feels” in the sense of “to exercise judgment, to reason practically.” With sound mind and balanced, wise intelligence, Paul holds the Christians in Philippi in his heart – not because they are handsome, witty or well-connected, or because he experiences some emotional mood about them, but because they are “partakers with me of grace.” We treasure our relationships with all who are loved by God; the love of God makes them lovable.

What provides depth to their friendship is Paul’s imprisonment. People behind bars often speak of “defense”; you get the best lawyer to make your case. Yet Paul’s concern for “defense” isn’t to get himself out of jail, but to insure the “defense of the Gospel.” Life in this world is like a grand trial in a huge courtroom. Witnesses try to drown out God by glamorizing secular life and denouncing what is holy. But God mounts a defense in the lives of humble believers who swear on the Bible and testify to the validity of the Gospel. God’s job isn’t to shield us as a buffer from difficulty. When we face hostility or suffer for our faith, God paradoxically is glorified.

In such dire circumstances, Paul “yearns” for his friends “with the affection of Christ Jesus.” Contemplate the affection Jesus had, the enormity of his compassion: can we love as he loved? Can we be the mirror that reflects his love, the ductwork that directs the warm breeze of the Spirit’s presence toward others?

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## **ePhilippians4 – February8 – God’s work in you**

*I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).*

How do we view people? How do we assess ourselves? When Paul thought about his friends in Philippi, he detected a hidden plot in their lives; he grasped the true drama being played out in his life and theirs. God has “begun a good work in you”! It is as if you are an old house, and God is engaged in an extensive renovation project, yanking out old flooring beneath your feet, rewiring you, giving old rooms new functions, beautifying, cleaning.

What is God doing in that person you live with? or work with? the one you found annoying five minutes ago? who lives across the tracks? or in the Sudan? If we can see God’s work in others, we might begin to notice God’s good work in ourselves. What is God doing in me? What is the project God is laboring over in my life? What would the completion look like? Am I erecting barricades? or investing in contrary endeavors that ruin God’s work?

Christianity isn’t one big decision, but a process. God began a work, is working, will be working on you for some time yet. Gradually we submit our desires, time, energy, cash, talent, and habits to God; gradually God chips away at the rough edges of my soul until the sculptured image of God appears.

And God is not finished yet: God will bring that good work “to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” My life is a prelude, a preparation for a brilliant, glorious destiny. The most important day isn’t my birthday, wedding day, or the day of my death, but the day of Christ, the consummation of all history, the climax to my life. “And fit us for heaven to live with thee there.”

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## ePhilippians3 - February 7 - gratitude

*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now (Philippians 1:3-5).*

Philippians pulsates with gratitude – a virtue that is downright counter-cultural in our culture of entitlement. Christians are grateful people, and the discipline of being thankful banishes resentment, selfishness, and a bevy of other ugly personality quirks.

Gratitude is a way of remembering: memory looks back and measures what is good, and discerns the hand of God. Paul's friends in Philippi had supported him financially – even though they were poor! It is their “partnership” in the Gospel, their sacrificial giving and their prayer, that inspires Paul to give thanks to God. Can you be that type of friend – to be the reason someone thanks God? Do you have such friends?

In the Roman world, friends gave and received gifts to elevate their social standing, to make a profit. But Christian friends imitated Christ, “who refused to use his divine status for his own advantage” (Stephen Fowl). The benefit we seek is the other person's, not my own.

And this is joy! Paul prays for his friends (this is what friends do!), and his prayer is his source of joy. Typically we hope to drain happiness (or at least fun) off others. But joy pours itself into others, and celebrates what God has done, and is doing right now. If you want joy, to go deeper than the merely temporary mood of fun or happiness, then be grateful. Be a partner in the Gospel. Imitate Christ. Pray.

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## ePhilippians2 - February 6 – in jail again

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

Long before Philippians was a book of the Bible, it was just a letter Paul wrote to a small circle of friends he'd met a dozen years earlier. In Acts 16:11-40 we read of the dramatic splash Paul made when he first arrived in Philippi, converting a rich woman, then a slave girl before he was thrown into jail for “disturbing the city.”

Now Paul is in jail – again. Prison conditions in the Roman empire were brutal. In those days, following Christ cost you dearly – as it might today if we followed closely enough.

Paul is not alone. “Where two or three are gathered,” Christ is there (Matthew 18:20). Celebrities stand alone, seeking attention; but Christ's followers are part of a larger Body. Timothy, fellow-traveller and lieutenant in the faith, didn't save his own neck, but went to jail with Paul. They are friends, with each other, with the Christians back in Philippi, and with Christ – and this letter will teach us much about that lovely, deep web of friendship into which God invites us.

These friends are “servants.” The Greek word, *doulos*, means “slave.” Paul had a master; in a world of slaves, he was slave to no one but Christ! He never fancied being free to do as he wished; his freedom was doing the will of God as doggedly as the most zealous slave in the empire.

If Paul is a slave, what are his readers? “Saints”? Is this flattery? To Paul, they are saints, not morally stuffy but humble slaves themselves, chosen by God, saved by grace. Saints are “unholy people who have been claimed, requisitioned by God for his use, for himself who is holy” (Karl Barth).

Residents of Philippi took pride in their citizenship, in their city's distinguished history: Mark Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius there in 42 BC; heroes of the Roman legion settled there to retire. But to Paul, they have bragging rights only as “saints in Christ Jesus,” who defines their destiny.

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## **ePhilippians1 – February 5 - introduction**

This week we begin (together) to read Philippians, a short, readable, understandable, challenging and delightful book of the Bible from which we can learn a lot.

Every day you'll get an email with a verse or two from Philippians – the most essential part of the email! Then I will add a brief reflection (shorter than those on The Will of God!) – and you may notice links on which you can click to learn more, to see photos or get some background.

As always, with any email you can click “reply” with questions or thoughts, and please forward these to any and everyone, use them in groups or studies – and know I am so honored to share a few minutes with you each day.

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