



2023 Weekly Devotions

Week of: July 17th - 23rd

Sermon: July 16th



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH
building community ◊ equipping believers ◊ serving Jesus

July 17

Philippians 1:3-11

Acts 28 describes the moment that Paul arrived in Jerusalem which was the culmination of a journey that was quite a bit more arduous than anticipated. A trip that should have taken a relatively few short weeks stretched out over months and included many profound obstacles along the way.

Consider for a moment that by the time Paul showed up in Rome he had been delayed by months, engulfed in a horrible storm at sea, shipwrecked and bitten by a venomous snake. These moments of note do not discount the other, more typical, challenges of enduring weather and encountering people of all different walks of life and faiths. To put it simply, Paul must have arrived in a worn-out state! This man had been through the ringer, and it is only as we attempt to understand his emotional state and circumstance that our passage from yesterday really comes into focus. You see, Luke tells us that Paul's arrival in Rome commenced with a meeting with the saints in Jerusalem (men and women of the faith who had heard of Paul's arrival and hurried over to meet the man who had authored the letter to them, known now as the book of Romans) and the result of this meeting was that Paul "thanked God and took courage." It was in their coming together that Paul was moved to praise and encouragement and this is incredibly instructive in that his praise and encouragement occurred in the middle of a trying season in Paul's life. As the Apostle marches towards his death, he finds in fellow saints a reason and motivation to worship and carry on faithfully.

It strikes me that many in our individualistic society have not stopped to consider the way that God has wired us to operate in community. The truth is that God has ordained the gathered church to be a primary means of edifications (see Hebrews 10:24-26) and this means that our meeting and communing with one another has immense personal significance. Paul's writings underscore his comprehension of the joy of knowing and walking with the saints and there is no better example of his conviction than that which is found in Philippians 1. In this precious text, the Apostle gives us great insight into the joy of fellowship in the family of God and my desire for this week is for us to examine the ways that our fellowship together results in praise and encouragement.

As we begin our walk-through Philippians, I want to initiate our study with a brief observation. Verse 3 begins with this phrase, "I give thanks to my God in every remembrance of you..." Notice the progression here, the Apostle is telling us that when he thinks about his brothers and sisters in Christ in Philippi, the result is thanksgiving to God. Stated differently, the result of his close relationship with the Philippians Christians is thankfulness towards God! The people of God were not a barrier to Paul's worship, nor were they inconsequential to Paul's worship, they were a primary motivation and cause of Paul's worship! Here the great man of God is telling us something that is profoundly important and often overlooked. Over the next 6 days, I want us to dive into this text in an attempt to try to understand how close, Christian relationships can catalyze praise which leads to our taking courage in the midst of life's storms.

July 18

Philippians 1:3-11

We stated yesterday that Paul's meeting with the fellow saints in Rome moved him to praise and encouragement. This is obvious in our text but the reasons behind his response are less apparent, particularly to the modern-day Christian. It strikes me that the way we tend to talk about our faith is so... individualistic. People will often tell me that you "don't have to go to church to be a Christian" or that the sum total of the Christian life is having a "personal relationship with Jesus..." While both statements are technically true, although the first is extremely problematic from a biblical perspective, the sentiments miss the communal nature of the Christian faith.

The simple truth is that the Bible as a whole, and the New Testament in particular, is FILLED with "one another" commands. God desires for us to "love one another" (John 13:34), "be devoted to one another" (Romans 12:10), "build up one another" (1 Thessalonians 5:11) and "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2) just to name a few. These repeated exhortations demonstrate that God's desire for us is to live with others in mind and in close proximity! I cannot bear one another's burdens if I'm not close enough to help tote the load. I can't build up a person I don't know and I certainly cannot love someone I do not know, at least not in the all-encompassing manner that Jesus commands. I suppose what I am trying to express is that God assumes a certain fellowship to be characteristic of our lives as individuals. We simply cannot obey the Bible without others in our lives which means that the fellowship of the saints is not only important but vital to our Christian walk and yet the reason behind God's commands is not just a sense of duty, the truth is that God has given us one another for our own building up as well.

We get a clear illustration of our joy in serving with others in a very important word in our passage for today. In verse 5, Paul says that praise erupts from his soul when he considers the Philippians' "partnership" in the Gospel. The words "partnership" means a relationship that exists for shared goals. To "partner" with someone is to unite with another party in order to work together to accomplish something. Typically, partnerships are formed because individuals are less equipped and/or able to be successful in a venture. Partnerships almost always communicate value shared.

In this case, Paul glorifies God because he is not in this Kingdom building endeavor alone. He is thankful that God has given him others to walk with and work alongside in making much of Jesus. The task to take the Gospel to the nations and make disciples in every place where the Gospel is preached is simply too much and the joy of seeing others enter into the field for the purpose of cooperating to share the good news of Jesus cause Paul to sing.

Paul's response is clearly one of joy, a joy that I know all too well. One of the great blessings of my life is to partner with you in sharing the Gospel. I love that I get to work, daily, alongside of Pastor Robert. I rejoice in the encouragement and wisdom he brings, the various gifts he has been given and the fellowship we enjoy. I know that my ministry has been so much sweeter and far richer because of God's graciousness in allowing me to work alongside of someone else, but Smyrna isn't just a result of your pastor's partnership, we rejoice in your partnering with us in the Gospel as well. There are few things in life that bring me more joy than to see people come to our church as a

product of your labor. I love to sit around the pool at our swim meets and watch my brothers and sisters in Christ share the truth and embody the love of Christ to people who need Christ. I love to hear stories of how you've taken a message or a Bible reading or a devotion and leveraged it for Gospel conversations. I love to hear how God is using your talents and abilities to expand His Kingdom in Dinwiddie and beyond and in all these things, I shudder to think about trying to do this on my own. Oh, dear brother and sister, God has orchestrated His Kingdom to flourish and His individual workers to be most blessed when we live in harmony with one another. Don't miss the reasons to praise and the encouragement your fellow man can give in God's rich blessing of the church.

July 19

Philippians 1:3-11

Yesterday, we spoke about the joy of partnership in the Gospel but we didn't give too many particulars as to what that partnership generally entails. Today, I'd like us to begin to look at verse 6 in order to discern some of the important aspects of the Gospel partnership that existed between Paul and the Philippians.

I will admit that today's devotion seems exceedingly basic. My assumption is that many of you will finish reading this entry and think, "I know that already pastor! That's obvious!" The truth is that I hope the content of today's devotion is obvious but I have learned that it is far better not to assume anything in discussing biblical necessities.

Verse 6 is an important verse. In its context, Paul is rejoicing in the power and faithfulness of God to complete the work of salvation in the lives of his Philippian partners. This short and simple verse forms a large portion of the ground of our assurance that believers are eternally secure. You will see in the verse that our security does not arise from our work or effort but from the character and promises of God. God alone is the actor in the verse. HE completes what HE starts and this means that our confidence in our eternal destiny is grounding in HIM alone. Does this mean that we don't work out our own salvation? Absolutely not! We do work to grow in our sanctification but only in the confidence that it is God working in and through our meager attempts to bring about His perfect, redemptive will for His children.

Now, what I want to focus on today is really a minor implication of the text. You will see here that Paul assumes something about his audience as he writes that he was confident that God had "begun" something in the Philippians. Stated succinctly, Paul was confident that God had saved his partners in the Gospel.

There is no meaningful partnership without salvation. if we are going to find encouragement and reasons for praise in our fellowship, we must make sure that those who form our fellowship of the saints are, well, saints! One of the great problems in our world today is that the church is full of goats and not sheep (to switch metaphors) and this means that so much of what comprises and characterizes the congregations that dot our landscape is not the kind of interaction and relationship that encourages and strengthens, instead many are left sapped and discouraged.

If we could boil down today's devotion to one statement, it would be this: partnership in the Gospel requires that each partner be saved by an embrace of the Gospel! There is no meaningful cooperation without salvation.

July 20

Philippians 1:3-11

As we begin our devotion today, I want to share a bit about one of the ways that God has strengthened my faith over the years. When I started in ministry, the aspect of the calling that scared me the most was the prospect of having to walk with and watch people pass away. As a young man, the idea of seeing death and suffering was quite intimidating.

I still remember some of the very first church members I walked with during their final days of life. I remember the first time I was in the room for someone to receive a terminal diagnosis, I recall some of the first people I saw on life support or struggling through the final moments of their time on earth. The truth is that I thought this would be discouraging but what I found was that their real faith and the peace of God that passes all understanding that so envelops true believers during their most dark, final, moments of life was one of the great joys and reassuring experiences in my own Christian walk.

I believe that my experience is in keeping with the point that Paul is expressing in verse 6, namely that God will finish the work of salvation that He began. True believers will navigate the tumultuous waters of their life because it is God who guarantees their safe passage and the privilege of watching God bring His children through life's most horrific moments with peace and strength is one of the underappreciated blessings of the Christian life.

You see, most of the time, God is accomplishing more than one thing in any circumstance. In this case, while God is bringing a child of His home, He is also using the example of the sick and dying to demonstrate His sufficiency and strengthen those who must continue in the work and, over time, the repeated joy of seeing people persevere in their faith breeds a confidence in God's faithfulness which is exactly what Paul is talking about here.

His confidence was not grounded in the Philippians ability or fortitude, it was based on the character and attributes of God which are revealed in Scripture and confirmed in the lives of our partners in the Gospel. I can't help but believe that Paul had others on his mind as he wrote this piece. Perhaps he thought about the example of Stephen as he stayed joyful even in his stoning. Maybe he considered the example of some other dear brother or sister in the faith who had suffered well. Perhaps he was contemplating the pronounced difference Christ had made in his own life and the faithfulness of God in his journey to that point. Regardless, true partnership in the Gospel had given Paul a front row seat to see the quality of the life of the Philippians, to sense their faith and to observe God's faithfulness in real time.

One of the great sources of joy and strength lie in the evidence of God's grace in others. I think of so many of you who are different than you were when I arrived 9 plus years ago. I marvel at some dear ones who have left our congregation and this world, some of them lately, steadfast in the faith and immovable in their conviction that God would finish what He began and each of these instances brings me courage and joy!

July 21

Philippians 1:3-11

As a reminder, we are diving deeply into the reason for Paul's response in Acts 28 this week. Luke tells us in the 28th chapter of Acts that Paul was able to meet with the believers in Rome and his response was that Paul took courage and praised God. We are trying to discern why Paul was able to take courage and praise God and we are doing so by examining his own words in referring to the encouragement he gained from the Philippians. The point then is that we can learn a good bit about what was going on in the Apostle's heart in Acts 28 by letting him reveal his heart in Philippians 1 as he speaks about his love for the saints.

Today's portion of the text demonstrates that Paul gained encouragement from the support he gained from the Philippians. What we see is that Paul experienced genuine partnership and solidarity from his fellow brothers and sisters, even in difficult times.

Verse 7 records a bit of a justification for Paul's expressed feelings as it begins with these words, "it is right for me to feel this way about you all..." What follows are two reasons why Paul loves his fellow Christians in Philippi and they go a long way in helping us understand the reason why he was encouraged and full of praise at the sight of the Romans.

Today we see that part of his love for the Philippians derives from their support of him while in prison. There is some difference of opinion as it relates to what this entailed but there is no wiggle room to misunderstand the sentiment expressed. Whereas many folks would wash their hands of someone who was imprisoned by such a powerful entity as Rome, the Philippians came alongside their brother and supported him in his darkest days.

There is an old country song called "you find out who your friends are". The song is a bit hokey (ok, it's a lot hokey) but the point is that the difficult moments reveal your true allies. In this case, the Apostle was encouraged because the people he loved and ministered to were faithful to him in his time of need. They had demonstrated a commitment to Paul and, more importantly, a commitment to Christ by staying connected to the Apostle in his difficult times.

Paul's ministry to the Philippians was not in vain and he learned as much in his dark season of life. The season of Paul's imprisonment demonstrated that he had true brothers and sisters in Christ who loved Jesus, were committed to the Gospel and really saw themselves as fellow workers with Paul in the mission to make Christ known. What realization can be more encouraging than that?

July 22

Philippians 1:3-11

One of the more powerful quotes I have come across in my reading is this one, “man should not be most afraid of failure, he should be most afraid of succeeding in things that don’t matter.” Unfortunately, I have no idea who first said these words but the truth they express is timeless. When you consider the life of Paul, you must consider the fact that his success was in a field that matters the most! What purpose could be greater than making Christ known and raising up others to follow in fulfilling the same task?

The obvious question that follows is this, how do we know that we have succeeded? It strikes me that many of us at Smyrna desire to make Jesus known and to raise disciples to do the same but it can be so difficult to measure our level of effectiveness. How do we know if our neighbor who was just supposedly converted really loves Jesus? How do we know if our children will follow Him when they are sent out into the world? What measuring stick exists to give us the results we long to see in the lives of our followers?

Today’s passage shows us that Paul was encouraged and strengthened because of the character and quality of the lives of the Philippians. Specifically, he saw that they were partners in him of the defense of the Gospel. These were men and women who had taken what Paul had taught and proclaimed it in the world. They had defended the Gospel against its opponents and demonstrated a desire to make Jesus known and this was encouraging.

This truth is perhaps best illustrated by a story that is told of the great British preacher Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon dealt with bouts of severe depression in his life and ministry. As a prominent pastor of a large church, Charles shouldered quite the burden, a load that sometimes was too much to bear. Over the years, Spurgeon discovered that one of the best medicines for overcoming his depression was testimony. Specifically, he loved to hear testimonies from church members about how God had used the ministry of his congregation to draw them to Himself. Charles found that there was nothing as impactful in his life as the encouragement that came from the example and story of his partners in the Christian faith.

The same principle is illuminated here and it stands true in our lives as well. Few things in life will bring more joy and encouragement and praise than the knowledge of God’s grace in the shared defense of the Gospel.

July 23

Philippians 1:3-11

The final devotional entry is perhaps my favorite. As Paul describes for the church some of the reasons for his hope and joy in their walk, he ends verse 7 by thanking God for the “confirmation of the Gospel” in the lives of the Philippians. There are many reasons why an individual’s life can serve to confirm the truth of the Gospel but I believe Paul’s pastoral heart would lead him to one specific application in our text today.

You see, the Philippians served as confirmation that the message Paul proclaimed and the Person Paul knew, namely Jesus, was indeed powerful and mighty to save. I will admit that this is a subjective argument and therefore it can never be the ground of our faith, nevertheless, there is a real sense in which the truth and power of what we believe is evidenced by the changed life that we live.

As Paul looked at the Philippians, he saw confirmation that Christ really does save His children. Think about the individuals he must have had on his mind. I have no doubt that people in the Philippian church were saved out of pagan worship, materialism, besetting sins and the like. I’m sure he had people on his mind who displayed the difference that Christ could make and their stories served to embolden and refresh the man who could see the beauty and worth of his message.

Now, please don’t get me wrong, the reason why we are saved is the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done. We don’t “need” subjective observation to become a believer and we don’t ground our hope in the lives of others solely for the simple reason that all men are prone to wander. Nevertheless, as I see the change in so many of your lives, I am reminded that our Lord and Savior is a powerful God. He is good and gives real meaning and purpose to our otherwise chaotic and pointless existence.

This is a fundamental way that the church works to “stir up one another to good works” (Hebrews 10:24-26). We are stirred up to carry on as we consider what Christ has already done and then think about what He might do in the future in the lives of those who don’t yet know Him. We are stirred to keep moving forward as we consider what possibilities await our faithful ministry. We are encouraged and brought to a place of praise as we observe the lives of others.

I imagine that Paul’s coming to the Romans was a moment of such praise. I imagine that he marveled at those that Christ had saved and I further believe he was fortified for faithfulness as he saw that the same Jesus who powerfully appeared to him on the Road to Damascus appeared to countless others in their own unique circumstance. As you gather to worship today, consider taking a look around to see what God has done in the lives of your fellow worshippers and allow that to encourage you to press on even as you are brought to praise!