

Faithful to Finish

Philippians 1

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What does it look like when we live as a Christian community? In the New Testament we have several letters written by the apostle Paul and various others to several Christian communities or churches. Many of them deal with problems or questions in the churches. All of them encourage people to remain faithful to Christ and they all portray something of what the church is to be like.

Philippians is a letter Paul wrote to a church he had planted around twelve years earlier. Acts 16 tells the story of Paul and Silas going to Philippi and the events that were part of getting the church started there. As Paul writes to his friends in Philippi, he's in prison in Rome. The Philippian Christians have sent Paul a gift—support for him in his ministry and his imprisonment. He's writing to thank them. This is the most personal of Paul's letters to a church. Paul affirms and encourages, even as he addresses the challenges of outside pressure and internal unrest that the church faces. Joy dominates this letter. The word "joy" in various forms appears sixteen times in Philippians. So joy and gratitude run all through the letter.

As we travel through this letter, I want us to hear what God is saying through Paul to that early Christian community and to us.

1:1-11 *God Will Finish What He Started*

There's a prayer attributed to Sir Francis Drake, the 16th Century sailor. He prays that when God leads us to undertake any great piece of work, God will also remind us "that it is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same, until it be thoroughly finished, that yieldeth the true glory." Drake himself was a "finisher" as well as a "beginner." Besides being a legend in his own lifetime for his military exploits, he had sailed all the way around the world. "Once you set off on a journey like that, there's no point stopping half way" (Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone—The Prison Letters*).

God is not a “half-way” God. God is a “finisher” as well as a “beginner.” Paul’s confidence comes from trusting that God is faithful and will see through to the end the work of grace he has started in us.

That’s good news, because it’s too easy to start and not finish. It may be a project around the house or a book we intend to read or an exercise program or involvement in some club or group or Bible study or even commitment to Christ. We often start well, with good intentions. But after a time, the project sits half-finished in the garage, the book remains unread, the treadmill functions as a clothes rack, or we find ourselves doing our own thing, relying on ourselves instead of on God.

Remembering how God’s work began in us and seeing God’s goal for us will help us get “unstuck” and growing again. There is a beginning. Paul refers to the “first day” when his ministry in Philippi began and the first people there put their faith in Jesus Christ. God began a good work in Philippi through Paul and Silas. The church there was established not just by human effort but by the work of God. That’s true of this church as well. And we trust it’s true about our new building and the ministry that will happen there.

For each of us, God’s work begins in our lives before we are even aware of it. But at some point we become aware and there’s a beginning of our response to God and our life as Christians. At some point we need to be able to say, “I believe God has come to me in the person of Jesus Christ.” We take that step without knowing all its implications. But we trust that the God we know in Jesus will continue to be faithful and loving.

So there’s a beginning. There’s also a conclusion. God, who began this good work in us, will finish what he started. Paul says that God will carry his good work to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. That’s the final day, the day when Christ appears again to claim his own and to bring in the fullness of God’s rule. On that day the work of salvation, which God began in us, the work of God in forming the church as God’s people, will be complete.

Notice the word “until.” It captures all of this time that we live in between the initiative of God’s love in the beginning and the last day when God faithfully fulfills his purpose in us. Paul gives most of his attention to

this time between the times. In his prayer of thanks here, and throughout the letter, Paul shows that God is re-forming people in the image of Christ and shaping his people into a community.

12-18a *God Will Finish What He Started even Through Adversity and Disappointment*

In this section, Paul is reporting to his friends what has happened to him. He's been put in prison because his preaching Jesus has stirred up trouble nearly everywhere he's gone. A traveling apostle put in prison—that must have felt like a running back having his legs shackled. He can't do what he's called to do. Paul's purpose in life was to serve Christ and he did that by traveling, telling people about Jesus and establishing churches in new areas. Now he's stuck in a Roman prison cell.

But he doesn't moan about how limited his ministry is. Instead, he writes to his friends in various places and his letters convey powerful descriptions of life in Christ. He tells the Philippians that his imprisonment has really served to advance the good news about Jesus. Everyone in the palace guard knew why Paul was there. Legend has it that the Roman soldiers guarding Paul kept getting converted and having to be replaced. Also, because Paul was in chains for Christ, many other Christ-followers were encouraged to speak God's word boldly and fearlessly.

Paul recognizes that some were preaching Christ out of love. Others were preaching Christ as a way to make themselves look good or to cause trouble for Paul. But Paul didn't let that get him down. He simply rejoiced that Christ was being preached.

What adversity, what disappointments do we face as we seek to serve Christ? We don't have to be defeated by those things. Instead, we can have Paul's attitude that Christ is everything and that God can fulfill his purpose through, or in spite of, whatever comes our way.

18b-26 *God Can Finish His Work even Through Death*

As Paul waits in prison, he faces the very real possibility that he will be executed instead of released. This sounds like bad news to his friends in Philippi. But Paul knows that he can honor Christ whether he lives or dies.

Elsewhere he says, "If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Romans 14:8).

Here, he says, "For to me, to live is Christ." That is, Christ is my life! "And to die is gain" or profit. To continue living in the body is to continue a life of service that will bear fruit and honor Christ. To die is to be with Christ, to gain Christ in a fuller way than is now possible and to bear witness to Christ in dying.

Based on this and some other things Paul says, we see Christian death as bringing us immediately into Christ's presence. After death, our spirit is with Christ in some way and there we await the Day of Christ Jesus, when he will also "transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21).

So we have the great confidence that, when Christ is our life, even death can't thwart God's purpose for us.

Fred Craddock tells about one of his teaching colleagues, a young woman who taught physical education. She was a marvelous person, young, vigorous, unmarried. One night she was sitting in her apartment grading papers, and she heard a knock at the door. She went to the door, unlocked it, and there stood death, with his yellow face staring right at her. She slammed the door, locked it, and called the doctor. He said, "Malignant." She had surgery. A few months later she was back, and Fred said, "Hey, you're looking good." She said, "I never felt better." She had lost some weight, but she was back teaching P.E. and everything seemed to be wonderful.

She was at home one night watching TV when she heard a knock at the door. She went to the door, opened it, and there he stood with his yellow face. She slammed it and locked it and called the doctor. He said, "Chemotherapy." She was sick. Her hair came out and she got a wig. When she came back to school, Fred said, "That's becoming. You should've been wearing it all along." She said, "I feel pretty good." And she was teaching again.

One night she was sitting grading papers in her room, and she heard a knock, so she went to the door, unlocked it, and there he stood, old death with his yellow face. She slammed the door and tried to lock it, but the lock

was broken. She called her friends and relatives. Everybody gathered, and they took turns leaning against that door. As they leaned against the door, they joked and laughed, "We're not going to let him in. We'll keep him out." They'd look out the window, and there he sat under a tree with his yellow face right out there.

One night she said, "Get away from the door."

"What?"

"Get away from the door." So they got away from the door, and he came in. Fred says he felt sorry for him. Death likes to come in with his fiery darts of pain and fear. There he stood; in one hand he had peace, in the other, rest. He looked like a servant of God (*Craddock Stories* 38-39).

When Christ is our life, even death becomes God's servant for us.

27-30 God Can Finish His Work in the Community of Faith even Through Suffering

Paul goes on to address two matters that really drive the whole letter. He lifts up concern for the Philippians' *steadfastness and unity* in the face of *opposition and suffering*. There is some internal unrest in the church, probably because they are facing opposition from the outside. Stress can make us react in different ways and sometimes we take it out on each other.

Philippi was a Roman colony. Most of the people there were citizens of Rome. The primary titles of Rome's emperor at the time were *kyrios* and *soter*—"lord" and "savior." These Christians were following and worshipping and proclaiming a new and different Lord and Savior—Jesus the Messiah. That put them in conflict and tension with the surrounding culture. So they needed to hang together and have unity in their commitment to Christ.

So Paul reminds them that they are not only citizens of Rome—they are citizens of God's kingdom. When he says, "conduct yourselves" he's saying, "*live as citizens* worthy of the gospel of Christ." Here, that means standing firm in unity, contending for the gospel together, not being frightened by the opposition. "He wanted them to fight the Lord's battle in the world, rather than fight each other within the church" (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Let God Love You* 53). Christ has graciously granted the privilege,

not only of believing in him, but also of suffering for him. Paul calls the Philippian Christians his “partners.” They are partners with him in the gospel (verse 4); partners with him in grace (7); and, now, partners with him in struggles (30).

Does our commitment to Christ put us at odds with the surrounding culture? Like the Philippians, we live in a world that’s not entirely friendly to the gospel of Jesus. But, also like the Philippians, we have resources for living Christ’s way where we are. We have the grace and peace that come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We are part of the community of God’s people on earth and in heaven, all those people of God we give thanks for. We have the confidence that God is at work to complete what he started. We have partnership with each other in the gospel, in grace, and in suffering. We have unity with each other in the gospel. We have prayer and the help that the Spirit of Jesus gives. We have the reality of Christ in our life—he is everything to us. So we don’t have to fear. We can confidently live as citizens of God’s kingdom and live out the gospel together here and now like they did back then in Philippi.