

The Joy Of Joining In

by Steve Zeisler

When the first Christmas cards of the season were delivered to our home last week it struck me that there are two very positive things immediately apparent in the better Christmas, greetings. First, they focus on the incarnation of Christ, when God became a human baby and brought salvation to mankind. And second, at Christmas time they bring a word about what is being thought of and done in families so that we can exchange personal concerns with one another by means of these letters and cards. Both of those things are important and honoring to God.

Of all the epistles in the New Testament, the one that is most like a Christmas card in these respects is the Book of Philippians. At the heart of this book is an ancient hymn on the incarnation of Christ. This is one of the most profound theological statements ever made. Paul writes of what it was like for God to give up his rights, to become a servant and die on a cross.

This book is the most personal, familiar, and most brotherly of all the general epistles of Paul. It is not so much a letter of an apostle to his flock as it is a brother's letter to his family, a co-worker writing to those with whom he has labored. The Book of Philippians is a very human document containing many tender expressions of personal concern.

Philippians 1: 1-- 2:

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The letter begins, as did all letters in the first century, with the writer announcing himself, greeting those to whom he is writing, and speaking a word of grace. We are told that the senders of the letter were Paul and Timothy. Paul, the brilliant, fiery, tenacious servant of God to the Gentiles- in my estimation one of the most remarkable men who has ever lived-- and Timothy, Paul's son in the faith, a younger man, timid at times, but a man with great leadership potential.

When Paul and Timothy first came to Philippi they were accompanied by two fellow-workers, Silas, a servant-- hearted, rather literary type of man, and a gentile, Luke, "the beloved physician," who is respected as one of the most meticulous of ancient historians. In Philippi these bond servants of Christ Jesus met three people who are clearly identified for us in Acts, and who are probably among those whom Paul calls in verse 1, "the saints . . . who are in Philippi"-- those who became members of this church and eventually led others to Christ.

We are told in the Book of Acts that the three whom Paul and Timothy encountered were, first, a wealthy merchant woman named Lydia, an immigrant from Asia Minor, who had settled in Philippi; second, a slave girl who had been callously used by both demons and men before she encountered the word of freedom spoken by Paul; and third, a jailer, a Roman soldier, a sturdy family man who, as a result of his own transformation, was able to lead his household to Christ. These are some of "the saints who are in Philippi," who are spoken of in verse one. There are others mentioned in the letter-- Epaphroditus, Euodia, Syntyche, Clement-- real people with a real history who loved one another, who had served, prayed and rejoiced together.

I don't think Paul ever felt he had "left" the church in Philippi, even during the years he spent traveling, or during the years he was locked up in prison, where he was at the time he wrote this letter. We are told in these opening verses that Paul carried these people with him in his heart. He always regarded himself as part of this living church. These people mattered to him; wherever he went he was part of their experience.

We know from the account in Acts that the church in Philippi had both a spectacular and a humble beginning. It was spectacular in that God led Christian ministers to Philippi by means of a dramatic vision, and the gospel was advanced by an earthquake and by political upheaval; it was humble, because the people God used were not impressive from a human standpoint. They were not the spiritual giants, the wise, the learned, the powerful; they were very ordinary people, beginning with a small group, led by a woman, who met for prayer by a riverside. God began to change the history of Europe by establishing a beachhead for the gospel at Philippi. The church there was a loving, godly church, filled with servants and saints. It had fine leadership from its overseers and deacons; it was a church of Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, women and men, married and single, old and young. Paul cared deeply for this church.

I must be on about sixty Christian mailing lists; at least it seems that way. Every day I get letters from individuals and from organizations. I have found that there are some letters to which I am drawn-- I can hardly wait to find out what they say-- but there are other letters that I have to force myself to pay any attention to. The reason is that I feel a tremendous affinity to people who have the same kind of heartbeat for ministry that I have, who are concerned about the same things, who are excited about the Lord in the same ways I am. Those are the people I love to hear from; those are the letters I look forward to reading.

I think the same kind of thing could be said of the Philippians, as far as this letter is concerned. There is a theme running through this letter that says that Paul, Timothy and the Philippians cared for the same things; they shared the same heartbeat; they had a common commitment.

That theme is elucidated for us first, in verse 5 of chapter one, where Paul speaks of "your participation in the gospel from the first day until now." Then in verse 7 Paul says, "it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me."

Paul calls the Philippians, "participants in the gospel," "partakers in the defense of the gospel." They were not spectators; they were not spiritual lookers-- on. They were people who had decided to join, to become soldiers in the war. As a result they shared something very important; they were given to the same cause.

Let us quickly look through the book to see what I mean by saying that this is a theme that runs throughout Philippians. Paul wants to tell the Philippian church about his experience and his current circumstances. Here is how he introduces that. Verse 12 of chapter 1:

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel.

When Paul writes to the Philippian church he talks about the gospel because that is what matters to these people.

In verse 27 of chapter 1, Paul exhorts the church to godly behavior:

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

When Paul writes to the Philippian church he writes about the gospel because that is the heartbeat of these people. They were participants.

In chapter 2, verse 19, Paul says he wants to send a messenger to the church at Philippi, someone who can communicate what is important to him, someone who will fairly represent what is happening in Rome. He says,

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But you know of his proven worth that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father.

Paul wanted a high recommendation for Timothy, who was to go to Philippi, so he said of him, "He worked serving the furtherance of the gospel." This is the cause that mattered to the Philippians.

In chapter 4, Paul is urging one of the leaders in the church at Philippi to minister to two women who have fallen into sin by bickering with one another; yet Paul speaks highly of those women and why they need to be ministered to and rescued from their sins. How does he identify them? Verse 3,

Indeed, true comrade, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel.

Paul says, "These women have joined in the cause of the gospel. We need to help them now in their struggle."

Lastly, in verse 15 of chapter 4, when Paul wants to commend these people he says,

And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone.

Paul is saying, "It is not true of every church that, having heard the gospel, they recognized the need to be participants. You are the only church that did, the only church whose heart was so caught up with the good news you determined that in the matter of giving and receiving you would continue to participate in what God was doing in other places in the world."

Participation in the gospel-- that is the theme running throughout this book. It is striking that both the Philippians and the great apostle viewed themselves as soldiers, as participants, as partakers of the defense of the gospel. They were not spectators.

Next week we are going to look more closely at what it means to be a "participant in the gospel." But looking ahead, two phrases, found in verses 18 and 20 of chapter one, sum up what it means to be a "participant in the gospel." First, Paul says in verse 18, "Only that . . . Christ is proclaimed"; and second, he prays (verse 20) that "Christ . . . be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death." Today, however, we are going to look more closely at some of the things that happen to people who have made this kind of commitment to become participants in the gospel.

In verses 3 through 11 Paul speaks of some of the things that resulted from this shared commitment. First, he speaks of his memory of the people in Philippi. Verse 3:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all . . .

Will you receive a Christmas card this year expressing those sentiments? Are there people who, when they think of you, are moved to joyous prayer and thanksgiving to God because the memories of times they spent with you are so moving, delightful and valuable? That is a magnificent statement to make about someone. A man whom I think of in this context is Dave Roper. Dave, who was a pastor here for a number of years, now pastors a church in Idaho. When I remember all the wonderful things Dave did for me I thank God for him and pray with joy that his ministry will continue.

Ron Ritchie has a kind of rogue's gallery of pictures on his office wall of people with whom he has stood shoulder- to- shoulder in the ministry over the years. Ron is a very wise man. He has gone out of his way to make sure he had pictures taken so he could look at that wall and thank God and pray for these people, to remember them because of what they have shared together. (It's also fun to observe how Ron has changed over the years- a few more pounds and a little more gray in his hair, etc.) But what a great statement to make: "I thank God for my memory of you."

The second thing Paul says is described in verse 6:

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

That is a favorite verse of many. It is one of the great statements summarizing the message of Christ. Paul is speaking here of the uniqueness of Christianity. Spiritual life and religion, he is saying, begin with God, are carried out by God, and are completed by God. All other attempts by man to be religious consist of trying to discover his own potential, to awaken the awareness within him, to find out how, by ritual, by learning or by exercise, he can make himself spiritually greater.

What is unique about the Christian message is that God is the one who originates it, God is the one who carries out the ministry to us, and God is the one who completes it. Our great hope does not lie in anything we have, in any contribution we make, but in the fact that Christ lives in us and through us; he empowers us to live as we ought to and he has guaranteed that he will finish the course with us. Paul is sounding a great theological note here.

But beyond that, what was even more exciting for the Philippians, perhaps, was Paul saying that he believed these things to be true of them personally. Do you know anybody who will say that about you when you are depressed, when you are fearful, when you feel like the world's greatest washout, when you hate yourself? Do you know anybody who will grab you by the shoulders and say, "I have seen the beginning of God's work in you. He is faithful; what he has begun he will finish"?

In recent weeks I have had several counseling opportunities that have been very difficult. One man I talked with battles every day with drugs and with a desire to kill himself. A young, unmarried woman I talked with lives in fear that she is pregnant, and all the implications that has. Another man is going through a very painful divorce. He feels utterly abandoned by his wife and child and cannot understand why he has to go through this.

It occurred to me that as a pastor there is one message I have to offer that cannot be offered by any other counselor. There are hundreds of psychiatrists, psychologists and family counselors up and down the Peninsula who could speak to these people and try to help them with their trauma; and some of those counsellors are very good at what they do. But a Christian counselor, a Christian brother, a Christian pastor, someone who believes the truth of the Bible is the only one who can say what is said in verse 6: that God has started something, and their hope is not in what they can do, their hope is not in what steps they will take next or the effect of this therapy or these drugs or whatever. Their hope is in a sovereign God who has promised to act, and you have seen him begin to act in them. What a great message, what a great word of confidence that is! If you know people in whom you have seen God lay the foundation, tell them so; if you have seen God's hand at work in them, tell them so. That will be a great word of encouragement to them.

So Paul tells the Philippians, first, that his memory of them is joyous; and second, he tells of his confidence in the work of God in their lives.

Third, in verses 7 and 8, Paul tells the Philippians that he carries them with him in his heart. He longs for them, he says, with all the visceral affection of Christ Jesus himself. What a beautiful statement! Do you know people who long for you with all the affection of Christ, who carry you with them in their heart? Will you or I receive a Christmas card expressing these sentiments this year?

There was quite a flap last week over a bust of George Moscone, the slain Mayor of San Francisco, which was unveiled in the new convention center in the city. A city and its people were trying to honor their late Mayor, to have his memory regarded positively by everyone who visited the new center. But I am convinced that although that bust was radical and unusual in some respects, no matter what concept the artist had come up with, somebody would have been disappointed. All external attempts to honor others, to erect monuments to people are always going to fall short. The most profound way in which that someone can be honored is exactly the way Paul states here. He tells the Philippians, "I carry you with me in my heart so that wherever I go you go and your name will be honored. I feel an affection for you that is like the affection of Christ. "

The fourth thing Paul shares with the Philippians is how he prays for them. Verses 9-11 :

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

There is growth, expansion, abundance and overflow about the issues Paul is raising in this prayer. He prays for the Philippians that their love may "abound," he says, that it may be in excess; and then he prays that their life may be "filled [filled to the brim] with the fruit of righteousness." There is a logical progression to the things Paul prays for. First, he says, "I pray that your love may overflow, and, having overflowed, that that love will be channelled by knowledge, discernment, understanding and insight into the way things really are." Love with discernment produces wisdom so that you will know how to approve the things that are excellent, he says. You will be able to choose between right and wrong. You will be able to steer a clear course through confusing times because you are people in whom love has grown and has been channelled by knowledge and discernment.

Then, Paul says, "I pray that your wisdom will result in character; that you will be men and women of sincerity and blamelessness, 'having been filled with all the fruit of righteousness,' people of substance, sincere people, honest and blameless at the same time." There are times when I consider myself blameless, but they are usually the times when I am being dishonest. Then there are times when I can be honest, but those times merely expose my blame. But Paul prays that they will be sincere and blameless at the same time, and filled with the fruit of righteousness. He is praying that Christian character be formed in these people. The result, he says, is that God will be glorified and praised. This is a magnificent prayer. If I had people praying this way for me I would not want anything else in life, if there were people committed to me in this way it would make all the difference in the world to me.

I want to illustrate what I think is an example of this kind of prayer being effective in the life of someone in this church, because it is possible to read a prayer like this and feel that it is so beyond our experience that it is a kind of prayer which is best written in calligraphy, framed and put on a wall.

Last week I was reflecting on the life and ministry of our brother, Bob Roe. The Board of Elders and staff are currently reviewing the ministries of staff and board members, examining each in turn. As we looked at Bob Roe's ministry, it struck me that Bob's body is becoming less and less useful to him. His heart is failing, and the prognosis is that his health will continue to deteriorate. He has less time for upkeep on his home, he is allowed to eat fewer and fewer kinds of food; he cannot travel; he cannot attend meetings as much as he used to. His body, the outer man, is wasting away, but the inner man is growing with the same kind of abundance, the same kind of overflow that Paul prays for the Philippians. Bob Roe's inner man is greater, bigger and wiser than ever before. He does not have time to do many of the things he once did, but he does have time to continue in the Scriptures, to love people in Christ and to love with the wisdom that Paul suggests here. Bob Roe now has time to review the ways in which he has not believed God in the past. He is a man of greater character than before; he is more sincere, blameless, and a man filled with righteousness, a man less subject to self--doubt than he was. He is wiser in his counsel and more sought after; his love is testified to by many. His life, as a result, causes God to be praised and glorified.

Here is an excerpt from a statement Bob shared with us before his evaluation:

There is a quality and an intimacy in my present relationship with my Lord which is simply inexpressible. To steal a phrase from Ray Stedman (and I don't know where he stole it), "It is better felt than felt." Paradoxically, at the same time I have an increasing sense of awe about his Person, and I find myself mentally prostrating myself at his feet. He is also opening up the Scriptures to me in a new and deeper way, and our times of prayer together have become a delightful way of life. I have never been so thankful to be his.

Paul is praying that the Philippian church will find these things overflowing in them: Love and discernment resulting in wisdom, resulting in character, which will result in the praise of God.

Paul's memories, his confidence, his longing and his prayer for the Philippians are beautiful to behold. As I said, these are things I would long to hear someone say of me at Christmas time. The heart of these statements and the reason for the beauty and the winsomeness of their relationship is, the fact that they (Paul and the Philippians) were committed together to participate in the gospel. Spectators do not know anything of this kind of a relationship.

Christmas is the time of year when the world tries to think the best of itself. We hear a lot about peace on earth, goodwill to men, etc. But what is described here in these opening verses of Philippians is a human beauty, an excitement about life, something that is worth living for, that transcends anything the world knows about. I ask you to consider your life. Are you missing something? Are you participating in the gospel, as the Philippians did, or are you merely a spectator?

Lord, thank you for the opportunity to study this book of Scripture together. We look forward to learning more about this Philippian church and its people. Shine your searchlight into our lives to help us examine ourselves. We pray that we might experience the beauty of the relationship that existed between the apostle Paul and the church in Philippi. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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