**Philippians (1:1-11)**

*“The* steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord”—Ps. 37:23. Someone wisely observed that God not only lovingly orders our steps but also our stops.

At one point in his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul experienced successive “divine stops” within Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).

The first time the Holy Spirit prevented him and his missionary team from pushing on to the western reaches—the coastal area north of the city of Ephesus. The second time, they tried to go north in Bithynia (northern area of Turkey bordering on Black Sea), “*but the Spirit did not permit them*” (Acts 16:6,7).

Finally, Paul looked NW – to Troas—a seaport city just across the Aegean Sea from Macedonia. God met any uncertainty Paul might have had—he had unmistakable instructions during the night—a vision of a Macedonian man pleading with him, “*Come and help us*” (Acts 16:8,9).

Luke writes in Acts 16:10: “*Immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.”* (First of 3 visits to Philippi)

Philippi was founded by Alexander the Great’s father—Philip of Macedonia. It was founded because at the time there was no more strategic site in all Europe. There was a range of hills which divides Europe from Asia, east from west and just at Philippi the chain of hills dips into a pass so that the city commanded the road from Europe to Asia, since the road had to go through the pass.

This was the reason that one of the greatest battles in history was fought. It was here (Oct 42BC) Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius and thereby decided the future of the Roman Empire. (The battle, involving up to 200,000 men in one of the largest of the Roman civil wars, consisted of two engagements in the plain west of the ancient city of Philippi. The first occurred in the first week of October; Brutus faced Octavian, while Antony's forces fought those of Cassius).

Not long after, Philippi became a Roman colony (300 retired soldiers with families). When these colonies sprang up, they were like little fragments of Rome and their pride in Roman citizenship was the dominating characteristic. The Roman language was spoken, Roman dress was worn; Roman customs were observed, and their magistrates has Roman titles.

In Paul’s first visit to Philippi recorded by Luke in Acts 16—Paul is brought before the magistrates and in verses 20-21 we read the charges that were given to the magistrates: “These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.”

Paul no doubt understood the importance of being a Roman colony had to the Philippians when writes to the Philippian church in 3:30: “*you are a colony of heaven*” (AV). Your version may read “But our citizenship is in *heaven.”*

Paul tells them that, just as any Roman colonist never forgot in any environment that he was Roman, so they must never forget in any society that were Christians. Nowhere were men prouder of being Roman citizens than in these colonies; and such was Philippi.

The story of Paul’s first visit to Philippi is told in Acts 16; and centers around three people—Lydia, the seller of purple; the demented slave girl, used by her masters to tell fortunes; and the Roman jailer.

There was a true friendship between Paul and the Philippian church—a bond of friendship closer than that which existed between him and any other church. Remember, Paul was always boasting that he had never taken help from any man of from any church, and with his own two hands, he had satisfied his needs. It was from the Philippians alone that he had agreed to accept a gift.

The setting as his letter opens is that it is about 12 years since his first visit to Philippi—and Paul is again under arrest—but not in a dank cell—but under house arrest (AD 61-AD 62) in his own rented home in the city of Rome (Act 28:30-31). He was waiting for a hearing before Caesar’s court. But he wasn’t entirely cut off from the outside world. Even though a soldier was guarding him day and night (Acts 28:16), Paul enjoyed a measure of freedom that enabled him to continue his teaching and writing ministry

During this lengthy stay, Paul drafted four letters that New Testament scholars call the “Prison Epistles:” Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Ephesians is considered a “circular letter,” addressed to the church in Ephesus but written to a more general audience with the intent that it would be circulated among the churches in Asia Minor (Turkey). In it, Paul discusses some deep theological issues. The shorter letter to the Colossians shares some similar themes with Ephesians, but Paul clearly wrote it to a specific church with particular challenges from false teachers—even though it he expected it to be passed around to other churches (Col. 4:16). Paul’s short letter to Philemon—a leader in the church at Colossae—dealt with the specific issue of what to do with a certain runaway slave who had become a Christian.

The letter to the Philippians was sent separately to Macedonia instead of Asia Minor and is unique not only when compared to the other three “prison epistles” but also within the New Testament itself. Unlike most New Testament books, there aren’t any problem passages for scholarly puzzle solvers to wring their hands over. It’s a pretty straightforward presentation with an easy to follow argument. Remarkably the letter doesn’t contain a single Old Testament quotation—perhaps indicating that the audience was mostly comprised of Gentile Christians and few Jewish believers. Also, and this is important, the letter to the Philippians sustains the theme of joy throughout, using the word in each of the four chapters and mentioning “joy” or the related verb “rejoice” a dozen times throughout. Finally, Jesus Christ is mentioned over 40 times in the letter, with the obvious implication that Jesus and joy go hand in hand. Overall, Philippians comes across as warm, encouraging, and affirming, the most positive of all Paul’s letters—even though he wrote it while in chains.

Some have called it the Epistle of Excellent Things and the Epistle of Joy.

In a way, the book of Philippines is a showcase of joy. Like a treasurer on display in the center of a gallery, joy can be examined from several angles to better appreciate its brilliance. Each of the four chapters reveals one of the distinct facets of joy: 1- Joy in Living; 2- Joy in Serving; 3- Joy in Sharing; and 4- Joy in Resting.

Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians *to encourage them to find Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered joy in living, serving, sharing, and resting.* Keep in mind as we go through this letter that he is writing to believers in Christ. His emphasis is since you already have the “mind of Christ,” live it out.

The opening verses of this letter are an unconscious commentary on the Christian life, both Paul's and the Christians at Philippi. Now since this letter was written, long and very painful centuries have passed by and the world we live in is a great deal different from the world Paul lived in, but the essentials of Christian faith and practice are completely unchanged. That is why this letter speaks loudly and clearly to us today. As we look at the first eleven verses of this letter, we will see here seven distinctives of a Christian.

(v.1) *"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons"* (or perhaps more accurately, with the pastors and workers, because deacons were not officers of the church but anyone who did anything in the church was a deacon, a worker.)

The ancient practice of correspondence had one very distinct advantage over our modern method. They signed their name at the beginning of the letter. We don’t receive letters very often today, because most of our friends and family use email. But think back to the past. Did you ever received a letter, perhaps two or three pages long, and had to flip through the pages to see the name at the end before you knew who the letter was from? The ancients were much more efficient, putting their name at the beginning.

"*Paul and Timothy*" (Timothy was with Paul in Rome)*,"servants of Christ Jesus*." But the address of the letter is very distinctive: "*to the saints in Christ at Philippi*." "*In Christ*" was the source of their lives. Philippi was the sphere in which they lived it. Both are very important in this letter. For what these people would be as citizens in Philippi would be determined by who they were as Christians. This letter if addressed to us would be to the saints in Christ at Newport (Aquidneck Island), for "in Christ" is the source and atmosphere of our lives. The sphere in which we live it is on Aquidneck Island.

As you read through this letter you will see that there are four major propositions that govern the Christian life. There is first those who are without Christ. There was a time when we all were without Christ, strangers, far-off, without any inheritance of our own. As Paul writes to the Ephesians, we were under the control of the God of this age, driven about by forces of which we were unaware, and we entered into the same concepts and lies that people are brainwashed with everywhere. We were without Christ.

Then there came a time. as with these Christians, when we were in Christ, that is, we entered into His Life and His Life entered into us by faith in His work and in His person. Experiencing the Joy in Living. We became personally related to a living Love. We didn't merely exercise faith in what He did or said. We knew Him. We became part of Him, a throbbing vital part of His life. We were in Christ. "*If anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away. All things become new*" (II Cor. 5:17)

Then as you read along you see there is a relationship of speaking and working and going out for Christ. That is, our lives are lived on His behalf. He is the focus of every activity. And finally, there will be that moment when, as the hymn says, "*Face to face I shall behold Him*" We shall be with Christ. These four propositions govern the Christian life. It begins, you see, by being in Christ, at Philippi or wherever we may be.

Verse 2 sets forth the Christian's atmosphere. "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*." (v.2)

When Paul put together these two great words, *grace* and *peace,* he was doing something wonderful. He was taking the normal greeting phrases of two great nations and molding them into one. *Grace* is the greeting with which Greek letters always began and *peace* the greeting with which Jews met each other. Each of these words had its own flavor and each was deepened by the new meaning which Christianity poured into it.

This is always the salutation in Paul's letters. These two elements, like nitrogen and oxygen, make up the atmosphere of the believer, an atmosphere from which we can never be successfully shut away. These are the two elements we continuously need, and which are continuously available to us in Jesus Christ. Nothing can keep them from us. They are absolutely inexhaustible. We can never exhaust them, and in this atmosphere of grace and peace from God all Christians live. The trouble is they don't always breathe very deeply.

What is grace? Grace is all God's wisdom and power--all of it--constantly available to someone who is utterly undeserving. All the richness might and wisdom of the person of God continually available to us, even though we are constantly aware we don't deserve Him at all. Peace is the inevitable result of the activity of grace.

Why is the Christian attitude different from others? Why are we not like the rest of the world--dissatisfied and discontented? Well, sometimes we are! When we are it is because we are not being all we could be in Jesus Christ. Why are we not? How do we find this peace that permits us to live untroubled lives in the midst of very troubled circumstances? The answer is we are constantly experiencing grace, God's riches continually available to us in Jesus Christ, and as we moment-by-moment draw upon them the result is peace and rest.

The third verse brings before us a very important element in the Christian's life: the Christian's associates. *"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."*(v.3)

This is the recognition that no Christian lives his/her life alone. They can't. We can't live as Christian hermits. We are members of a family, and we need each other very, very much. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian, one who has no relationship with anyone else. I know occasionally you meet people who because of difficulties they experienced in Christian relationships want to go live their lives by themselves. They never want to come to church or have anything to do with other Christians. When I hear that I am immediately saddened, because one of the first signs the scriptures tell us of new life in Christ is that we love the brethren. John says this is an unmistakable sign that we are born again, that we love the brethren, and if we choose to live apart from them something's wrong.

You notice how Paul thanks God continually for all of the believers in Philippi. He needed them--even the irritating ones, and there were some. We'll read about them a little later on in the letter. There were two ladies who couldn't get along with each other, and evidently with a lot of other people too. We'll meet them at the end of the letter. Paul loved them all! You notice how he specifically says, "*always in every prayer of mine for you all*." If you are reading this from the King James Version, you will notice how frequently he employs this term, "*you all*" (so much so that someone accused Paul of being a Southerner, or at least that the church in Philippi was located in South Macedonia).

Now what is he thankful for? First, for the recollection he has of them. That prayer meeting (recorded in the Book of Acts) out by the riverside where he first met Lydia, that remarkable businesswoman who was the means of opening the gospel in that whole city. And then the occasion when they were thrown into prison and God did such a marvelous miracle of deliverance for them, resulting in the salvation of the Philippian Roman jailor. I think Paul always looked with humor on how all the city fathers came down to the prison to apologize for throwing him into jail and escorted him out of town, giving him a special honorary escort. He is thankful for their participation, you see, for their partnership in the gospel, for this one church above all others sent him help from time to time. How much this association means to him!

In the next verse we have the Christian's assurance: *"And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ"* (v.6).

Perhaps his joy in these people at Philippi was that he was seeing them by faith. Not as they were, but as they would be when God's work was done. He was looking at them with the eye of faith. He was sure that He who began a good work in them was going to finish it, so he could say even though you rub me the wrong way once in a while, I know what you are going to be. I think this is the key to getting along with other Christians. Sometimes it's difficult, but when we see what they will be we can do it. I remember hearing the story of an artist who called a friend in and asked him to comment on a picture he was painting. He said, "this is my masterpiece. It is beautiful." The man said "I guess I don't see what you see. It just looks like dabs of different colors to me, without form or anything." The artist said, "Oh I forgot. I'm seeing it as it will be when finished. You are seeing it as it is now."

This is what Paul was doing. He was seeing these Christians as they would be, and he says thank God it's going to happen. What a comforting verse. Many times, I confess, in times of discouragement with myself when I utterly despaired of being what I ought to be, because I was so aware, as you must be at times, of the deceitfulness and subtlety of the flesh, that even when I want to be, I end up deceiving myself. I see the utter futility of depending on me to get this job done. Then I've remembered this verse, "*being confident of this very thing that He who has begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ"* (v.6).

This means that life is not perfect yet. It has an adequate goal, and it is a goal which will be reached, and the final responsibility is not in my hands but in God's. I love that! You see his confidence is placed in a Person, not on himself. A pastor tells the story of an engineer, Dr. Gerhard Dirks, who told his congregation of how he became aware that the electronic computers with which he works, which he helped to invent, cannot correct their own problems. They must rely upon the operator to clear out all the error, and how this convinced him that he could not change his own life no matter how much he wanted to, but he must come back to the one who made him. That brought him to Christ.

This is what Paul is saying. We are all, if we know Christ, in the hands of the One who can change us. Sometimes we don't want to be what God wants us to be, but it's being done despite us. God knows how to bring us into the circumstances that will make us willing to be made willing, if He needs to. It's a great consolation to recognize in whose hands we are. I think the impression is often given by us Christians today that our main task is to keep Christianity going. Christianity didn't start that way. These early Christians gave the very clear impression that it was their faith in Christ that kept them going. There are those who tell us that we can lose our Christian life, but if this is something we can lose, then it must be based on some human factor, that it depends on us. If it depends on us, then we can't depend on it. I am so grateful that this rests upon a Person who is capable of doing the work. Thanks be to God who is able to keep us from falling.

In *verses* seven and eight we have a Christian's affection. *"It is right for me to feel thus about you all, because I hold you in 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."*

He is anticipating their reaction to what he has written. He knows that when they read verses three and four, they will say, "*Oh Paul, you shouldn't say that. We're not that good. We're not that worthy of your praise*" And he said, "*No, it's right for me to think that. In fact, you are so close to me it's as though you are sharing my imprisonment and my ministry everywhere, I go. That is how I hold you in my heart."*

But it's not mere natural affection, and now the secret comes out. "*God is my witness,*" he says, “*that it is not my natural affection for someone who has been kind to me, but the affection I have for you is Jesus Christ's affection through me--His affectio*n.” This is the secret of loving the unlovely. Sometimes we are called to do that, you know. If a man, woman, boy or girl is a brother or sister in Christ, we are expected to love them. Not only that, we can love them. Well you say, "you don't know the one I have to live with. Oh, I know they are a Christian, but the way they carry on and the difficulties they put in my path to loving them--you don't understand." Well, perhaps I don't, but that doesn't change the fact we are to love them. Well, how do we do it? I'm sure Paul would have said, begin to think how does the One who lives in me look at these people? What is His attitude? Is it resentment, bitterness, anger because of their actions? Or does He see them differently than I? Then act on that basis. Begin to act toward them as you know the One who is in you acts and thinks toward them. The amazing things is when you do there comes an answering sense of affection for these very ones who were so hard to love.

Then in verse nine we have the Christian's activity. *"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment."*

Now if you and I were writing a letter to new Christians, wanting to stir them up to activity, what would we say? Would we not probably urge them to witness, because somehow in our day there has come the idea that all Christian life exists for but one purpose--that the believer may be a verbal witness. And if we are fulfilling that job in talking with someone about God, we are fulfilling all that is expected of us in our Christian lives.

You notice Paul doesn't say a word about this. Because, of course, love in action is the greatest witness. He says, "*I pray that your love may abound more and more*." That the love of Christ which is in you, and which you can't help but find there if you are at all a believer, may now find expression in affection. What does that mean? That means there is some resulting activity--love in action! Not promise but performance. I think they needed this in Philippi, and I think we need it here in on this island, too, that our love may abound in activity. Otherwise, it's what James says, "*faith without works is dead*" (James 2:17). If love doesn't show itself in some action, then it's not real love.

But somehow today we have developed what we might call a committee mentality. Because we have a department or bureau in the government to take care of all these things, we leave it to them. But a Christian must never do this. We are all equally responsible, when we see a need in someone's life, to do all we can to meet that need. This is what Paul is praying for, "*I pray that your love may abound more and more."*

There are two things added: with knowledge and with discernment. Love by itself, left to flow unchecked and unregulated, can sometimes be disastrous. Love acts like hate when it refuses to think. All of us have had experience with some of these folks we call consecrated blunderers, who deal in sanctified stupidity. They mean well; their hearts are in it, but they never bother to get the facts and to see if they can help intelligently, and sometimes they are a great nuisance. Paul says that isn't enough. Love with knowledge. Learn the situation. See how you can really help. Don't just plan to help without any investigation as to whether it will do the job.

Then, "love with discernment". I think Paul means there is a time to help, and people to be helped, but there are times not to help and people who ought not to be helped. This brings to mind the story of the prodigal son, when that boy was down there in the far country. I think the father in some way knew where that boy was and what he was doing, but he never offered to help him. He couldn't. He let him go into the far country because for that moment there was nothing else, he could do. He couldn't help the boy until he came back, and when he did the help was available to him.

And then the last thing, is the Christian's accomplishment. What will love do with knowledge and discernment? What will be the result? There are four things mentioned. First, so that you may approve what is excellent. That is, you will put the proper priority on things. You will approve the things that matter most, and not spend your time on trivia. One of the weaknesses of our Christian lives is that we are constantly putting the emphasis on the wrong syllable. We emphasis the wrong things. Life gets out of focus, out of perspective. It's because love is not exercised with knowledge and discernment. When it is, we will approve what is excellent.

Furthermore, we will be sincere and blameless. This word "*sincere*" is most interesting. In the Latin it means "*without wax*" and in the Greek it means "*sun tested*". Both of these come from the same experience. In the ancient world oftentimes, they made little images or pottery which would develop cracks. In order to pass these off as perfect, some of the merchants would fill the cracks with wax so the crack was not observable. There was a way of find out. They put the item out in the hot sun for a while. If there was wax, the sun would melt it and the crack would become visible, so it was "sun tested". Paul is saying that the Christian life ought to be one without hypocrisy, without wax, so constantly exposed to the light that is in Jesus Christ that it is continually “Son” tested. This is where the Christian lives, in the light of the glory that streams from the face of the Father in heaven. If in our lives before Him we hide nothing, we are then sincere, blameless, and as a result we are filled with the fruits of righteousness.

What does that mean? The fruits of righteousness are the fruit of the Holy Spirit, that wonderful list in Galatians 5:22, "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-contro*l." This is not something achieved by the effort of the will. It is growth of character, evident when our lives become honest and sincere. They come through Jesus Christ, not through positive thinking, or some psychological experience or psychotherapy. It's through Jesus Christ.

One individual put it this way: "*He had to be what He was, to do what He did, and He had to do what He did in order that we might have what He is*." That is why we gather at the Lord's table, because this is a remembrance of what He did, and what He did was done in order that we might have what He is and thus manifest what He is to the world. When we do, it is for the glory and praise of God. That is what God is looking for in your life. He isn't looking at what activities you perform. He is looking for the character you present--what you are. And what you are ought to be so continually abounding in love that it will result in glory and praise to God. Now as God looks at our lives as we partake of the bread and wine, have we’ve seen that all He is, is made available continually to us by grace, and all we need to do is dare to believe Him and appropriate all that He is?

In closing let me ask you something. We saw that Paul was an encourager to the Philippians. What does it mean for you – *How to be an encourager.* What is the application of these verses in our own lives?

Even though imprisoned, his letter brought encouragement to the Philippians. How did he do that? How do you lift the hearts of fellow believers who might be feeling discouraged and overwhelmed? We can follow Paul’s example in Philippians.

* Pray specific, detailed prayers for them, and let them know what you have prayed.
* No matter your own situation, try to stay positive, confident, hopeful, and encouraged in the Lord.
* Through the Word of Truth and God’s wisdom, help your friends see their circumstances from a wider perspective.
* Remind them of what they already know but may have forgotten: life is about today, not yesterday, and refocusing on Jesus Christ will make all the difference.

Prayer: *Our holy Father we thank you for the glimpse into the lives of these early Christians. What world-changing possibilities were involved in these simple lives. What a tremendous impact they left upon their world. How much this is needed today! Lord, keep us from the folly of thinking that it is the programs we launch or the activity that we fulfill or our busyness that accomplishes your will today, but rather what we are in Jesus Christ, and all that marvelous love of His being flooding through our experience* and actions. We pray this may be clear to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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