



# *In Christ Alone:*

## A Thematic Study of Paul's Letter to the Philippians

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# In Christ Alone

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## Preface

*"We are specifically, consistently, continually proclaiming, demonstrating and teaching the crucified and risen **Christ** of the Scriptures in all aspects of the Gathering process and program" (Outcome No. 1, LCMS Gathering Future Search Conference, 2013).*

*"To live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21).*

*"At the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10-11).*

*"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8).*

*"Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ ..." (Phil. 3:9).*

*"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14).*

*"Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved" (Phil. 4:1).*

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (Phil. 4:4).*

*"I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).*

*"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).*

*"Though the Gospel is capable of doctrinal exposition, though it is eminently fertile in moral results, yet its substance is neither a dogmatic system nor an ethical code, but a **Person** and a **Life**" (Philippians, J.B. Lightfoot, 1868 ed.).*

# Introduction:

## Three Songs, Two Stories: Where Do You Stand?

Consider using this introduction section as a one-part group study.

### Questions:

- What songs are popular right now? You know, the songs that get stuck in your head and are unavoidable on the radio? Make a list.
- What key themes or ideas do you notice in these songs? What message are the lyrics communicating? Are they lamenting, celebrating or recounting any specific idea or story?
- What song (whether it's on the list you made or not) would you choose to describe your life? Perhaps it speaks to what you have experienced, learned or how you hope to live.

### *“Standing on my own two feet”*

Do you know which album:

- Is recognized by the 2012 edition of the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the best-selling album in the world for two consecutive years (2011-12)?
- Is the best-selling album of the 21st century in the United Kingdom?
- Held the top spot on the U.S. charts longer than any album released in the last 30 years (24 straight weeks)?

The answer is “21,” the second studio album by the breakout British recording artist Adele. Like the artist’s debut album “19,” the title refers to Adele’s rather tender age at the time of the album’s production. The story behind the music, however, is not so tender. Brashly autobiographical, “21” was inspired primarily by a relationship gone violently, perhaps even abusively, wrong. That story is bitterly and broken-heartedly recounted by Adele in the chart-topping song “Turning Tables”:

*Close enough to start a war  
All that I have is on the floor  
God only knows what we’re fighting for  
All that I say, you always say more*

*I can’t keep up with your turning tables  
Under your thumb I can’t breathe*

Using religiously-flavored language and imagery, the song offers a two-step plan of escape from the “haunted skies” and “hundred storms” that have left the singer gasping for breath because of this increasingly nightmarish relationship.

### Step No. 1:

*So, I won’t let you close enough to hurt me  
No, I won’t rescue you to just desert me  
I can’t give you the heart you think you gave me  
It’s time to say goodbye to turning tables*

### Step No. 2:

*Next time I’ll be braver  
I’ll be my own savior  
When the thunder calls for me  
Next time I’ll be braver  
I’ll be my own savior  
Standing on my own two feet*

Sometimes, of course, removing yourself from a bad situation or ending an unhealthy, dangerous relationship is exactly the right and necessary thing to do. And sometimes we do need to “stand up for ourselves” rather than letting people use us or abuse us. Obviously, these truths articulated so artistically by Adele resonated with millions of fans around the world. In just two years, the album sold more than 26 million copies!

Sometimes, however, words and ideas from catchy, popular songs that contain certain grains of truth can become so ingrained in our minds that they become a virtual philosophy of life, our own personal “religion.”



*Next time I'll be braver, I'll be my own savior — standing on my own two feet.*

### Question:

- What are some potential problems with this song's approach to life's problems — especially when this becomes a person's basic and foundational "philosophy of life?"

### **"Here in the love of Christ I stand"**

Another chart-topping pair of singer-songwriters from the United Kingdom, Keith and Kristyn Getty, also write and sing honestly about the "fierce storms and droughts" of life and the need to find a "savior" and a safe place to stand. Compare their solution to the "plan of salvation" laid out in the previous song:

*In Christ alone my hope is found  
He is my light, my strength, my song  
This cornerstone, this solid ground,  
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.  
What heights of love, what depths of peace,  
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!  
My comforter, my all in all  
Here in the love of Christ I stand.*

Adele's solution to "love gone wrong" in her song, "Turning Table," is to give up on love altogether and learn to live and fend for yourself. But none of us can live without love. It is our most basic and fundamental need. And self-love simply will not satisfy. "**Here in the love of Christ I stand,**" sing Keith and Kristyn.

Ironically and paradoxically, even Jesus Himself did not achieve "Savior" status by "standing on his own two feet." Just the opposite, in fact, is true:

*In Christ alone, Who took on flesh,  
Fullness of God in helpless babe!  
This gift of love and righteousness,  
Scorned by the ones He came to save.  
'Til on that cross as Jesus died,  
The wrath of God was satisfied  
For ev'ry sin on Him was laid  
Here in the death of Christ I live.*

A "helpless babe" can't "stand on his own two feet." Nor can someone who has been beaten bloody and nailed to a cross — or someone who has died and been buried. But:

*There in the ground His body lay,  
Light of the world by darkness slain  
Then bursting forth in glorious day,  
Up from the grave He rose again!  
And as He stands in victory,  
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me  
For I am His and He is mine  
Bought with the precious blood of Christ.*

### Questions:

- Where do you see your friends and peers turning to find solutions to life's problems? What solutions do they find?
- Maybe you have tried "standing on your own two feet" as a solution to life's problems. Maybe you have tried being "your own savior." Maybe it's not working out as well as you had hoped or planned. There is another way, another story, another plan of salvation:

*No guilt in life, no fear in death  
This is the power of Christ in me  
From life's first cry to final breath.  
Jesus commands my destiny.  
No power of hell, no scheme of man,  
Can ever pluck me from His hand  
'Til He returns or calls me home  
Here in the pow'r of Christ I'll stand.*

### **"And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord"**

The heading of this opening section speaks of "three songs" and "two stories." Life gets very complicated sometimes and it's easy to get pretty confused about what may seem to be unlimited theories and philosophies and religions that promise to provide answers and solutions to life's problems. It helps to remember that according to the Bible, there are really only two ways to live your life and tell your "story": either a true way that is centered in Jesus Christ alone, who is "the Way, the Truth and the Life" or a false way that is

centered in your sinful and delusional desire to be your own “savior.”

The two songs above represent and summarize those two stories, those two very different and opposite ways of living out the story of your life.

The third “song” referenced above is an ancient song — a song written almost 2,000 years ago. We don’t know who wrote this song, but we find it quoted or paraphrased in an ancient letter, the letter of Paul to the Philippians written around 62 A.D. Since we believe that the words of Scripture are “God-breathed,” inspired by God Himself, we can accurately say that this song was inspired by — even written by — God Himself as a perfect summary of what it means to live our lives “in Christ alone” and to “stand” in His love and power alone.

What follows is a study of Paul’s letter to the Philippians based on the theme “In Christ Alone.” The study seeks to highlight other key themes of Paul in this letter flowing from this master theme. At the heart of Paul’s letter is this great and ancient “Christ-hymn,” which God has given us to help us to ponder the mystery and magnificence of the “Master Story” of Jesus Christ. His story is also our story when by faith alone we claim Jesus Christ alone as our Lord, Savior and Master.

“Your attitude,” says Paul, “should be the same as that of 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, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so 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*  
(Phil. 2:6-11 ESV).

## Questions:

- What key themes or ideas do you notice in this song recorded in Phil. 2? What message do the lyrics communicate? Are they lamenting, celebrating or recounting any specific idea or story?
- How do these ideas compare to the lyrics and themes of the songs in your first list? Similar? Different? Does anything surprise you or raise any questions?
- What might it look like to have the “lyrics” of Phil. 2 stuck in your head instead of the songs on the radio? How might this change the way you tackle life’s challenges?





# Brief Overview of Philippians: Background, Context and Purpose

## First Things First: “Take and Read”

Before you read another word of this study, I would strongly encourage you to find a quiet place, safe from outside distractions and interruptions for at least 15 minutes. Turn off the ringer on your cell phone (or leave it — can you handle the panic? — in another room) and *read the letter of Philippians aloud verse by verse, word for word*. Read at a steady, brisk pace like you would read any letter containing significant news from a beloved family or friend. Use the English Standard Version if possible, since that it is the version of the Bible we will be using primarily in this study and in Gathering-related materials and events.

I did this myself just a few minutes before typing these words and timed it on my cell phone (with the ringer off!). It took a grand total of 12 minutes and 41 seconds. I tend to read a bit fast, so it might take you a minute or two longer. It's well worth the investment of less than 15 minutes of your time. While I hope you find this study to be helpful and meaningful, my words are not inspired by the Holy Spirit. The words of Paul's letter are. They are divine words, Spirit-filled words, “living and active” words, able to create and strengthen faith and literally transform lives — including yours. And whatever insights this study might be able to offer on these divine words, those insights will be much more meaningful to you if the inspired words of Paul are fresh in your mind as you read through this study. So, stop. *Read the letter of Philippians aloud*. God will richly bless you as you do.

## Remember: It's a letter.

(**Wait!** Have you just finished reading through the letter of Philippians aloud? Just checking.)

Philippians has been described as the “most letter-like” of all Paul's letters (Lenski, 696). In

other words, this is not a grand doctrinal treatise (e.g., Romans) or an expose of false doctrine (e.g., Galatians) or an attempt to deal with an imploding congregation (e.g., 1-2 Corinthians) “disguised” as a letter. No, this is a *letter* disguised as a letter — i.e., it is not “disguised” at all. It is exactly what it appears to be, and is best read and appreciated as such.

“Paul talks in a charming way [in this letter] about his plans for communicating with the Philippians, a human touch that breaks the strain of theological argument. The Epistle seems to have no formal or logical order. It flows along in the most easy and natural way and treats the weightiest topics and the most incidental with equal ease and grace” (Robertson, 158-159).

Paul wrote this letter for much the same reason(s) that we write letters or thoughtful emails and text messages today: to share the latest news, to say thank you, to share heartfelt greetings and/or encouragement to friends or family. When we do this, of course, we often give people insight into who we are and what matters most to us along the way — not as some hidden agenda but simply because there is a real me behind the letter. When it comes to the various interpretations of Paul's letter to the Philippians over the years, “attempts have been made to read more than this between the lines” (Lenski, 695). The problem is that such attempts often end up diverting the reader from the actual contents of the *letter*, which are indescribably rich, personal and powerful in their own right.

To be sure, as with almost any letter or email written today, there is undoubtedly a lot going on “behind the scenes” here — but “efforts to reconstruct situations should not be allowed to become too ingenious” (Lenski, 696) lest we become more enamored with our creativity and “genius” than with Paul's (and the Holy Spirit's).



In the course of preparing this study, I read or consulted well over a dozen commentaries on Philippians, old and new. You can peruse the list in the “Bibliography and Resources for Further Study” section at the end of the study. Although I learned from them all in various ways, the benefits I received from reading these commentaries pale in comparison to the blessing I received from reading this little letter itself time and time again over the past several months, hence, “First Things First” above.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is in many ways like “Christianity 101.” It contains concise but potent presentations of the basic components and building blocks of the Christian faith — Christology, ecclesiology, justification, sanctification and eschatology. Although very readable and deeply personal, Paul’s presentation of these topics also holds great potential for profound theological development — even if that is not the primary purpose for his writing. As Paul writes this letter, he is facing the very real prospect of death. The imminence of death has a way of simplifying and clarifying what really counts, what really matters. Staring death in the face, Paul confesses his faith to some of his dearest Christian friends. This is no time for rambling or pontificating. He keeps things short, sweet and to the point, always leading to the same dual nadir (the cross) and apex (the resurrection), united in Christ alone.

All of these factors, in my view, make this letter especially “meet, right and salutary” for use in a context like the LCMS Youth Gathering. This is Christianity at its core, presented with passion centered around Christ’s passion and resurrection, cutting to the heart of what really matters in life and at the end of life: “To live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

In this study, then, we will studiously seek to avoid getting too caught up in overly complex historical, contextual or even doctrinal details and attempt to focus instead on the “simple” and utterly profound words and message of the text, centered always — as is the letter itself — *in Christ alone*.

## Excursus: The Opening “Acts” of the Church at Philippi

The book of Acts, written by Paul’s co-worker in Philippi, Luke, is crucial background reading for a fuller appreciation and understanding of all of Paul’s letters, including Philippians. If time allows, even a simple read through of the book of Acts — with its stirring story of the birth of the New Testament church and the missionary efforts and travels of Paul and the other apostles — would greatly enrich the study of this letter for adult leaders and youth alike. If time is limited, at least read Acts 16, which provides the specific background of the initial founding of the church of Philippi.

Acts 16 itself is fascinating and compelling reading, including such dramatic events as:

- Paul’s nighttime vision of the “man from Macedonia,” pleading, “Come and help us!”
- The down-by-the-riverside conversion of the prominent, generous and open-hearted businesswoman Lydia. “Get your premium purple goods here!”
- An “annoyed” Paul’s exorcism of a fortune-telling slave girl whose owners are even more annoyed with Paul for ruining their business, leading to Paul’s and Silas’ illegal arrest, severe “beating with rods” and deep-dungeon imprisonment, complete with “feet fastened in stocks.”
- The apostles’ midnight choir performance in prison, which literally brings down the house in an earthquake, empties the jail and nearly leads to the jailer’s suicide. He gets baptized instead, after hearing one of the shortest and most potent sermons in history: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”
- Paul’s more defiant annoyance that his legal rights as a Roman citizen have been seriously violated in this Roman city, his demand for an official apology and a public police escort out of the city. This is all in a day’s work for Paul, apparently ... for the sake of Christ alone.



# Key Contextual Components of Philippians

## CHAINS for the sake of Christ alone

Paul writes from prison, most likely in Rome. He's been there a long time — perhaps two years. His conditions have improved, BUT ... it's still *prison*. Veteran readers of the Bible can get a bit ho-hum or academic about this: "Oh yeah, another one of those captivity letters" (e.g., Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon). But when is the last time you spent a night in prison? Or a year in prison? Two years? Even if you have done some time behind bars, my guess is that it probably wasn't for the same reason Paul was there: as punishment for proclaiming the politically and legally incorrect Gospel of Jesus Christ alone.

There is "deep pathos" (Franzmann, 122) in Paul's final words to the Colossians: "Remember my chains" (4:18). This is a true story with real human emotion. Paul was a flesh-and-blood person like you and me, not some super-human Bible superhero. His prayers didn't "automatically" get answered. Prison gate-breaking earthquakes didn't happen every time he hummed a hymn. His wrists and ankles bled from iron fetters. Death, by illness, exhaustion or execution, was a daily possibility.

Keep this in mind as you read this letter. And remember that even today, around the world, countless confessing Christians are suffering brutally (in prison and worse) simply because they are Christians and refuse to stop confessing faith **in Christ alone** — even though it would be an easy way to make horrible suffering go away. (As I write this study, one story in the news is of a Sudanese Christian wife and mother, Meriam Ibrahim, who gave birth to her second child in a Khartoum prison after being sentenced to death for allegedly converting from Islam to Christianity and for refusing to renounce her Christian faith. As of this writing, she is still being detained and her case is still pending in Sudan.) As you read the book of Philippians and remember the chains of Paul and other Christians (now and throughout

history) imprisoned for their faith in Christ, meditate on this astounding fact: "Joy is the music that runs through this epistle, the sunshine that spreads over all of it. The whole epistle radiates joy and happiness" (Lenski, 691). How in the world is that possible? ***In Christ alone.***

## TEARS of joy in Christ alone; of sorrow healed by Christ alone

This is a deeply emotional letter — the most emotional of all Paul's letters. "It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart" (1:7). The Christians at Philippi, Paul's "brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown" (4:1). Just as Jesus wept, so did Paul. "And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. "And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again" (Acts 20:37-38).

Perhaps Paul wanted to spare his dear friends in Philippi the sorrow experienced by those in Ephesus (Acts 20); death seems imminent, but "I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come" to you again (2:24). Imagine the tears Paul shed for Epaphroditus, sent by the Philippians to minister to Paul, who then became "ill, near to death" (2:26). "He nearly died," repeats Paul — why? "For the work of Christ" (2:30).

Not only dying friends but also deadly enemies produced tears of sorrow for Paul: "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ" (3:18). And yet, hear it again, the tears that flow from Paul's eyes in this letter are predominately tears of another kind: "Joy is the music that runs through this epistle, the sunshine that spreads over all of it. The whole epistle radiates joy and happiness." How in the world is that possible? ***In Christ alone.***



## FRIENDS forever, in Christ alone

“For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.”

### Question:

- How many friends do you have about which you could say this? Perhaps a better or more pointed question is this: How many friends do you have about which you would *never* dream of saying this?

“How I yearn for you *with the affection of Christ Jesus*,” says Paul. “What a friend we have *in Jesus*,” we sing. Real friendship is possible with many people on many levels, but there is something unique and incredibly powerful about friendships that are rooted in the affection that Christ alone has for us — the affection that He demonstrated by laying down His life for us.

The “I’ll-do-anything-for-you” friendship of Christ leads friends of Christ to lay down their lives for other friends of Jesus and, amazingly, even for the enemies of Jesus. Paul’s dear friend Epaphroditus “nearly died” — for Paul, for Jesus, for the sake of the enemy-loving Gospel of Christ alone. Paul is all too familiar with so-called friends who “all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (2:21). Do you have “friends” like this? Timothy, like Epaphroditus, is another true friend of Paul — and more. “As a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.” He loves Paul. He loves Jesus. So he also loves the friends of Paul and Jesus: “I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.”

### Questions:

- Do you have a friend who is genuinely concerned for your welfare? If so, how can you tell that person you are thankful for them?
- Are you a friend someone else can depend upon and know you have their genuine concern for their welfare?
- What does it look like to be a true friend?
- What would this look like to have these kinds of friendships with the other youth in your group who are going to the Gathering? Consider using this opportunity to talk about writing a group covenant. Here’s a Gathering resource to get you started: [www.lcmsgathering.com/gathering-covenants/](http://www.lcmsgathering.com/gathering-covenants/).

Give me *one* friend who is genuinely concerned for my welfare and I will be satisfied. Paul had many: “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (1:3-5). Paul’s deep and abiding friendships in Christ help to explain, perhaps, despite unimaginable suffering and the most of dire of circumstances, why: “Joy is the music that runs through this epistle, the sunshine that spreads over all of it. The whole epistle radiates joy and happiness.” How in the world is this possible? ***In Christ alone.***

## ENEMIES viewed through the eyes of Christ alone

We all have them, don’t we? Some of us more than others, perhaps — and maybe some of us deserve them more than others. But how many of our enemies are enemies precisely *because* we are friends of Christ? This was Paul’s problem. People hated him, devoted their lives to making his life miserable, even tried again and again to kill him, simply *because* he had devoted his life to serving and proclaiming *Christ alone*. How depressing! How discouraging. So why doesn’t Paul sound depressed and discouraged? For one thing, because at the hands of his enemies, “Most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (1:14). In other words, Paul has the wisdom, faith and discernment to see that God can use even our *enemies* for good — to actually *advance* the cause of the Gospel. God can use our enemies to bless and convert enemies of Christ.

Paul even has “church” enemies. Can you relate to that? I once heard a speaker in a predominately Baptist crowd quip: “Most of my friends are Baptist, but *all* of my enemies are Baptist!” Some of the Christians, or so-called Christians, Paul knows are jealous of his status and success as a church-planter and missionary, and they are actually motivated for ministry by their hatred for and jealousy of Paul. “Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry ... not sincerely but to afflict me in my imprisonment.” So Paul calls down upon them thunder from heaven — right?

Wrong. Instead, he says, “What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (1:18). Wow. There’s that “joy” again. Joy inspired by *enemies* who are *proclaiming Christ* for all the wrong reasons — and yet God is using them and blessing their work despite themselves and their evil motives.

Paul, depressed? Discouraged? No. Here’s what Paul says to the Philippians and to us: “Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine like lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life” (2:14-16). If we could cultivate this attitude by the power of the Spirit through “the word of life” we might just discover how it is that “joy is the music that runs through this epistle, the sunshine that spreads over all of it. The whole epistle radiates joy and happiness.” How in the world is this possible? ***In Christ alone.***

## **POLITICS** placed into the service of Christ alone

Paul’s life and ministry were rife with politics. Perhaps that seems obvious because politics, both good and bad, are simply a part of life in this world. It’s easy to forget sometimes when we read the “sacred words” of Holy Scripture that this was also true of every character and “hero” of the Bible: Abraham, Sarah, Joseph, Daniel, David, Esther, Amos, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah ... Jesus. The central and salvific Christ-story of Holy Scripture is pervaded by human and often unholy politics. Enemies of Jesus plot, stalk, bribe, falsely accuse, meet secretly by night, cut deals, rig juries, pay people to lie under oath, manipulate trials, whip up mass hysteria, rig prisoner swaps, play endless political games to get finally what they so desperately want: this innocent Man nailed to a cross. And that, dear friends, is how you and I were saved. Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant” (2:6-7) — yes, even a “servant of politics,” if necessary, as a part of God’s saving plan.

Paul did the same. He asserted his political rights when it looked as though this would serve the cause of the Gospel. Note Acts 16:37, “They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No!” He appealed to Caesar: “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go” (Acts 25:11). Yet, like Peter and John (Acts 4:19-20), he also clearly understood that “we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” — Caesar and politics be damned.

Should we be politically concerned? Yes, in “gospel” moderation. Should we be politically involved? Yes, in accordance with our vocations and with the wisdom and discernment given us by God. But remember this: We see and understand about .0001 percent of what God is doing “behind the scenes” through human politics, even through the worst of unjust political machinations. “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ” (1:12-13). Paul gets thrown into a Roman prison for two years — what horror! What injustice! What a tragedy! Yes, but “God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive” (Gen. 50:20) — not just physically alive as in the story of Joseph, but eternally alive. “So,” as with Joseph so also with Paul, “it was not you who sent me here, but God” (Gen. 45:8).

Think: Joseph. Daniel. Jesus. Paul. You. Me. Yes, even our church body “stuff.” Put “politics” in divine perspective. Finally, and above all, remember this Philippian nugget of truth: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, *by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself*” (3:20-21). Politics, in the church and in the world, is a major source of depression and discouragement for many of us. Paul’s life was rife with politics and yet: “Joy is the music that runs through this epistle, the sunshine that spreads over all of it. The whole epistle radiates joy and happiness.” How in the world is this possible? ***In Christ alone.***



## Questions:

- What political situations are going on around you in your community? State? Nation? World?
- What issues or topics are you interested in or even passionate about?
- Reflect on this statement: “We see and understand about .0001 percent of what God is doing ‘behind the scenes’ through human politics, even through the worst of unjust political machinations.” How does that affect the way you think about the political situations going on around you? How might it affect the way you pray for and interact with these issues?
- What can we learn from Paul’s example of joy and trust in the midst of unjust government?
- What political issue do you need to put in “divine perspective”? Stop right now and pray to God about this.

## DEATH is gain in Christ alone

As Paul’s life was rife with politics, so Paul’s letter to the Philippians is rife with the **aroma of death**. Epaphroditus “nearly died.” Paul, it seems, will almost certainly die soon. After Paul’s emotional greeting and a brief assurance his imprisonment has served to “advance the cause of the Gospel,” Paul’s very first “sermon” in this letter is ready-made for preachers at Christian funerals from and for time immemorial. I have “full courage,” says Paul, that “now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death” (1:20). “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (1:21). Paul is not by any stretch of the imagination suicidal. He is filled with joy and convinced that “to live is Christ!” Yet, “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 will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith” (1:22-25). Paul keeps giving assurances — “I yearn to see you and know I will see you again!”—but his yearning to “be with Christ” is palpable and keeps resurfacing. “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the

resurrection from the dead” (3:10-11). Says John A. Hutton in his classic (1934) work *Finally, With Paul to the End*:

It is most probable, it is almost certain indeed, that Paul wrote letters subsequent to his Epistle to the Philippians. And yet, from many points of view ... the Epistle to the Philippians may justly be regarded as Paul’s Last Will and Testament (218; cf. Martin, vii).

Try reading Philippians this way — as Paul’s last will and testament. It helps explain the deep emotion of this letter. It helps explain the profound hymnic profession of and self-identification with Christ, who “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (2:8-9). It helps explain the focus on heaven and the resurrection and the strange and exultant sense of “freedom” that this captivity letter breathes. “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (4:1) — including die well, peacefully, confidently, joyfully. Joyfully. There’s that word again. “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering 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” (2:17-18). People today — youth and adults alike — desperately need something that is worth living for — and worth dying for. We will find that something in this letter. That something is Someone named Jesus. “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (1:21). That explains why: “Joy is the music that runs through this epistle, the sunshine that spreads over all of it. The whole epistle radiates joy and happiness.” How in the world is this possible? **In Christ alone.**

## Questions:

- Do you agree people desperately need something that is worth living and dying for? Why or why not?
- How do you see your friends and peers searching to find this “something”?
- What do you think is something or someone worth dying for? How does this motivate you to live?

## CHRIST alone

### Question:

- “Jesus Christ” or “God?” Without carefully counting, guess how many times Paul references our God?

The first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Philippians contains 30 verses. How many times does the word “Christ” appear in these 30 verses? Count them: **18** times in 30 verses Paul names the name of “Christ.” “Jesus” (often with “Christ”) is named eight more times in the first chapter. There are five references to “God,” two to “Lord” and one to the “Spirit” of Jesus Christ. That’s **34** references to the divine name in 30 verses. Paul speaks eloquently about the “mind of Christ” in chapter 2 (see verse 5), but it’s clear what’s on his mind in this letter: Christ alone. “Christ” is named **37** times in this brief, four-chapter letter.

### Question:

- How have you seen the purity and clarity of the Gospel of Christ alone increasingly challenged and compromised in America in both church and culture?

It’s hard to think of another book of the Bible that more aptly and powerfully and beautifully reflects and expounds the theme “IN CHRIST ALONE.” As the purity and clarity of the Gospel of “Christ alone” is increasingly challenged and compromised in America in both church and culture, and as opposition to the Gospel of “Christ alone” continues to rise around the world with alarming rapidity, it’s hard to think of another book of the Bible that could be used more fruitfully, powerfully and *joyfully* to equip and resource God’s people — young and old — for Christian witness, mercy and life together in today’s world and church.

Paul’s constant theme throughout this epistle is to supply a rationale for Christians in time of persecution (1:27-30), to enunciate the true motifs of Christian living under the lordship of Christ, once humbled and suffering unto death (2:1-13) and to re-iterate the genius of life-in-Christ as the following of a path which is necessarily one of weakness (3:10-11) in hope that one day the resurrection will usher believers to a new existence (Martin, 34).

Among the captivity letters, the letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians show us Paul the fighter for the truth, the thinker and theologian, the great strategist of church unity. The letter to Philemon shows us Paul the man whose whole life is irradiated by the grace and glory of the Gospel. The letter to the Philippians, with its many and various facets, is harder to classify. One modern scholar has brilliantly used this letter as an introduction to the whole thought-world of Paul. He sees in it the characteristic union of Paul the believer, Paul the missionary and Paul the theologian. Perhaps one might best use *the bold joy of faith* as the common denominator of its multiplicity, faith as Luther once described it:

Faith is a living, resolute total confidence in God’s grace, a trust so certain that it is willing to die a thousand deaths for its belief. And such a trust in God’s grace and such knowledge of God’s grace make a man joyous, resolute and robustly cheerful over against all God’s creatures. An imprisoned apostle writes to a persecuted church, and the keynote of his letter is: “**I rejoice. Do you rejoice?**” Where under the sun is anything like this possible except where faith is, where the Holy Spirit breathes His wholesome and creative breath? (Franzmann, 144-145).

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). Once more: “Joy is the music that runs through this epistle, the sunshine that spreads over all of it. The whole epistle radiates joy and happiness.” How in the world is this possible? ***In Christ alone.***

Joy, says G.K. Chesterton in the closing paragraph of his classic work *Orthodoxy*, is “the gigantic secret of the Christian,” especially when Christianity is compared or contrasted with other strikingly joyless religions. This may seem odd when we consider that, as much as Jesus himself spoke about joy, he is not pictured in the Gospels as “bubbling over” with joy. To Chesterton, however, this does not seem odd at all — especially in view of the biblical fact that Jesus “made himself nothing,” “took the form of a servant” and “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” (Phil. 2:6-7). Let me bring this section to a close by offering Chesterton’s closing words in this classic work:



Joy, which was the small publicity of the Pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian. And as I close this chaotic volume, I open again the strange small book from which all Christianity came; and I am again haunted by a kind of confirmation. This tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall. His pathos was natural, almost casual. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud, proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears; He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet He concealed something. Solemn Supermen and Imperial Diplomats are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down from the steps of the Temple and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell. Yet He restrained something. I say it with reverence

— there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth, and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth (160).

### Questions:

- Reflect on the statement, “Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian,” especially when Christianity is compared or contrasted with other strikingly joyless religions.” Do you agree? How have you seen this to be true?
- Why do Christians have reason for so much joy? How do we receive this joy (think about the means of grace)?
- How can we encourage others in their Christian joy, even in the midst of trials?







# Thematic Commentary on Philippians

## I. True and Abiding JOY in Life, Suffering and Death — in Christ alone (Phil. 1:1-26).

**Summary:** “Joy is the music that runs through this epistle” — and the master chord for that music is struck the moment the opening curtain of this letter begins to rise. This first section of the letter is absolutely bursting with joy. Every single prayer Paul prays he prays “with joy” (1:4). Wherever, whenever and however Christ is proclaimed, even from wrong motives, Paul rejoices (1:18). Who will douse his enthusiasm? Paul is a bull-headed rejoicer: “Yes, and I will rejoice” (1:18) — just try to stop me. Even the prospect of death can’t dampen Paul’s joy — ha! “to die is gain” (1:21). But, says Paul, “I know that I will remain and continue with you all” — why? To bring *you* more joy (1:25). Where is this joy rooted? “In Christ Jesus” (1:26).

### Questions:

#### ***Some initial observations and applications:***

- “Young people are not rebellious toward faith, but tend to be apathetic” (National Study of Youth and Religion Notes, 2013 [hereafter NSYR]). “Apathy” and “joy” just don’t go together. What’s missing? How, where and why is it missing? “American young people know well and reflect ‘adult culture’” (NSYR) Do they fail to see true joy in the lives and attitudes of the adult Christians in their lives?
- One “dark side” trend among youth is “increased intoxication (drugs and alcohol) and at younger ages” (NSYR). Elsewhere, Paul seems to suggest that true “joy in Christ” can serve as an antidote for “getting drunk with wine” (Eph. 5:18). How can we help young people grasp and “catch” the reality of this joy in Christ (which is much more than mere “emotionalism” — Paul is facing *death!*)?
- Another “dark side” trend is “unhealthy sexual practices” (NSYR). To what extent might this, too, involve a misplaced search for “joy and happiness” that Paul says is found only “in Christ alone”?

- What’s the problem with Law-based attempts to address these problems and concerns? (“Stop being apathetic! Stop getting drunk and high! Stop having sex! Oh, and by the way, start being really, truly joyful!”)

### Verses 1-2: Greeting

*“Paul and Timothy”:* In six of his letters including this one, Paul identifies himself with young pastor-evangelist Timothy. This is quite striking since Paul is the “big man” on the apostolic block.

**Ask yourself and discuss:** What does this mean (cf. Phil. 2:19-24)? The 2013 LCMS Youth Gathering Future Search Conference [hereafter NYGFSC] identified two major youth trends: 1) A “growth in youth’s desire to *lead* and *collaborate*” and 2) A “decrease in adults making meaningful investment in kids/youth.” Can we learn anything in this regard from Paul’s collaboration with, investment in and promotion of young Timothy?

*“Servants of Christ Jesus”:* Why does Paul describe himself and Timothy as “servants” (or “slaves”)? (See Phil. 2:7). Do you think he sees this as a “demeaning” term or a title of honor? Why? The church father Chrysostom said that whoever is a slave of Christ is “not a slave in any other realm” (ACCSNT VIII, 217). What do you think he meant by this?

Interestingly, Paul does *not* identify himself here as an “apostle” as he often does in his letters. Why? Perhaps this is evidence, right off the bat, “of the warm relationship” between Paul and the Philippians — there was “no need to remind the Philippians of Paul’s authority” (Silva, 39).

*“To all the saints in Christ Jesus”:* Do you consider yourself to be a “saint,” that is a “holy person”? What difference do those three little words “in Christ Jesus” make?

The church father Theodoret says, “By *those*



who are holy he means those who have worthily received holy baptism" (ACC VIII, 218). Discuss.

"Overseers and deacons": Every congregation and group needs leaders. Young people desire to be led and to be or become leaders. How can both adults and youth support and facilitate this?

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ": A standard first century salutation, right? Well, sort of. But Paul adds his own "signature" and trinitary twist that essentially sums up everything it means to be a Christian in one simple phrase and greeting. What sets me apart as a Christian? GRACE. PEACE (Shalom). CHRIST! From that "trinity" comes ... joy!

## Chapter 1, Verses 3-11: Thanksgiving and Prayer

"I thank my God ..." (verse 3): Not a bad way to start every letter, every thought, every day, every conversation (at least "inwardly"). How often do you hear someone say, "Oh, my God!" Contrast that with the way Paul speaks of "my God."

"All ... always ... all ..." (verse 4): There is nothing "halfway" about Paul's faith and theology — why? It is completely rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is always and only a "100 percent" Gospel. Jesus forgives ALL your sins. He did it ALL for you. You can ALWAYS count on him for EVERYTHING. "Rejoice ALWAYS," says Paul (Phil. 4:4). "Do not be anxious about ANYTHING" (Phil. 4:6). "Pray about EVERYTHING, with thanksgiving, and God's peace will surpass ALL your understanding" (Phil. 4:6-7). "I can do ALL things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). "My God will supply ALL your needs in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). When, why and how does our faith become or sometimes look like a "halfway" faith?

"Your partnership in the gospel" (verse 5): The Greek word for "partnership" is *koinonia*, which means to "share in a common thing." What do all true Christians have "in common?" As you read through this letter, note special aspects or characteristics of Paul's "partnership" with the Philippians. How can both adults and youth encourage young people to feel more like and actually be "partners" in the Gospel on all levels of the church's work and life?

"I am sure ..." (verse 6): How can Paul be so sure of this? Complete this sentence: "My salvation depends on \_\_\_\_\_ plus \_\_\_\_\_." *Hint: This is a trick question. The answer is Jesus + Nothing.*

"The day of Christ" (verse 6): This "day" is clearly foremost on Paul's mind "these days" as he sits in prison and composes this letter (see 1:10; 2:16; cf. 3:10-12; 20-21). Why?

"Feel ... hold you in my heart ... yearn for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus" (verses 7-8): Note again the deeply emotional language Paul uses here. "Nowhere else in his letters does Paul express with such intensity an affectionate yearning to see his friends" (Joersz, 187). How might this be explained? The Greek word for "affection" here is *splanchna*, which literally means "entrails" or "guts." Have you ever cared about or missed a person so much that (literally) your "guts ached?" So did Jesus. See, e.g., Mark 6:34, Luke 7:13, Luke 10:33 and Luke 15:20 where this same Greek word is to describe the deep, aching love of Christ for sinners like us in narrative or parable form.

"That your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment" (verse 9): Obviously, the love that Paul is describing here is "more than a feeling." As Christian love grows, develops and matures, it also grows in "knowledge and discernment." What do you think it means to have a "wise and discerning" love in contrast to a love that is not "wise and discerning?"

Another "dark side" trend among youth identified by the NSYR is "A lack of *understanding* of 'morality,' including a 'limited understanding about the source of one's moral reasoning.'" How might Paul's description of true (Christ-sourced) love address and assist in addressing this problem?

"Through Jesus Christ" (verse 11): Take a moment and literally *count* for yourself how many times Paul names "Christ" in these first 26 verses. What does that say to you about Paul? What does that suggest to you about your own thinking, conversing, living? What does that suggest to you about the significance and appropriateness of the theme for the 2016 LCMS Youth Gathering?

According to the NSYR, “Young people often don’t understand the Gospel and who Jesus is.” This is appropriately described as a “challenge.” What other word(s) would you use to describe this reality? One rather “obvious” trend identified by the NYGFSC is “youth’s decrease in loyalty to institutions/organizations,” including the institutional church. In light of the theme “In Christ Alone”— is this trend necessarily a *bad* thing? What insights and opportunities does it provide for young people and for the institutional church?

## Chapter 1, Verses 12-18a: The Advance of the Gospel

“*Brothers*” (verse 12): As is noted in most editions of the ESV, the Greek word used here (adelphoi) is inclusive of men *and* women, so it is best translated or at least understood as “brothers and sisters.” This is especially significant in the context of this particular letter, since the founding of the church at Philippi centers around the conversion of a prominent and perhaps wealthy woman, Lydia (See Acts 16:11–15.). Two other women are specifically named later in the letter (Euodia and Synteché, 4:2); even though they are mentioned in the context of an unfortunate “squabble” of some kind, the fact that Paul singles them out and “entreats” them, shows that they were influential members of the congregation. Ralph Martin notes that “in Macedonia, of all the Greek provinces, the status and importance of women was well known” (8). One classic work in Hellenistic civilization asserts (cf. Proverbs 31!):

If Macedonia produced perhaps the most competent group of men the world had yet seen, the women were in all respects the men’s counterparts; they played a large part in affairs, received envoys and obtained concessions for them from their husbands, built temples, founded cities, engaged mercenaries, commanded armies, held fortresses, and acted on occasion even as regents or co-rulers (See Martin, 8).

“*What has happened to me has really served ...*” (verse 12): Here is a great and powerful little biblical word: “really” (Greek *mallon*). How often are we able or willing to see what is “really” going on in the circumstances of life, whether they are outwardly “good” or “bad”? Paul was given

eyes of faith to see this, partly because he viewed everything through the lens of “what advances the Gospel”— which sometimes defies all human reason and comprehension.

“Most of us know the words of Paul in Romans 8:28. Read them together. *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* Few of us, however, probably believe them in “child-like” way as Paul did or live our lives in the same joyful and confident faithfulness to them. Think of all the “bad things” that have happened and are happening to Paul at this time. Paul focuses on the good things that God is engineering “in, with, and under” these outward events going on: prison as a place for strategic witness to politically influential people; prison as a time for prayer, meditation, character development and providing others an opportunity for Christian service; prison as an opportunity to reflect and more fully identify with the salvific sufferings and servanthood of Christ; and prison as a means of emboldening Paul’s friends and co-workers in their proclamation of the Gospel.

Franzmann (122): “Paul’s imprisonment was ... not an interruption of his apostolic ministry, but a fruitful exercise of that ministry. Not least among the fruits that grew on that tree of adversity are the captivity letters” themselves — including the letter of Philippians. Think of the incomprehensible gift God has given to the world through these letters of Paul — which wouldn’t have been written at all apart from this admittedly horrible experience, but which “served to advance the cause of the Gospel” in untold ways.

Think of some “horrible things” that are going on in your life or family, in the world and perhaps even in the church these days. Can you think of how God might “really” be using or planning to use these things “to advance the cause of the Gospel?”

“*Only that in every way ... Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice...*” (verse 18): Discuss this truly amazing attitude of Paul. How is it possible? (Hint: “In Christ Alone.”) We don’t know exactly who these “rivals” and “opponents” of Paul were or if or how they are related to other “opponents” referenced later in this letter or in other letters, but their motives of envy, rivalry, insincerity and desire “to afflict me” are clearly wrong and sinful.



So how can Paul still “rejoice?” Are there people today who preach Christ with sinful goals and motives? How and to what extent can we rejoice in this? What comfort and assurance does this bring in the context of rival groups that may exist even within the church or a specific congregation or church body?

## Chapter 1, Verses 18b-26: To Live is Christ

Read and re-read the powerful words of Paul in this section and discuss them as a group.

### Questions:

What impresses you most about them? How do you think it was possible for Paul to say and mean them?

- Discuss this statement: “This is a man who knows that he is personally, absolutely, eternally loved by God in Jesus Christ.” Does anything trouble or confuse you about these words of Paul in verses 18b-26?
- To what extent can or can’t you relate to Paul’s words in these verses? Can you say, really and truly that “to live is Christ” (21)? If not, would

you like to be able to say it? Do you know people whose lives and attitudes seem to revolve around and “radiate” this truth and reality?

- The No. 1 trend identified by the NYGFSC was “Youths’ increase in desire for authentic and substantial spirituality.” Do you agree with this assessment or not? Would you agree that the words of Paul in these verses reflect an “authentic and substantial spirituality?” How can both youth and adults “connect” the “desire” of youth today to the vibrant, life-affirming, death-defying joy of Paul “in Christ alone?”

Reflect on these words of Paul in light of the key finding of the NSYR, which was “to encourage churches to look past church membership, denominational decline, attending meetings, etc.” and instead to focus single-mindedly on:

**Helping teens, parents and young adults really, truly and *existentially* to understand this one and only, inescapable, awesome reality: That they are for all eternity, personally, absolutely and unconditionally loved by and reconciled to God *in Jesus Christ* — and will only ever have real life by living in and out from that reality.**



## II. Genuine UNITY through Utter HUMILITY — in Christ alone (Phil. 1:27-2:30).

**Summary:** Unity and harmony in the church. That's Paul's main pastoral concern in this letter, and it comes immediately to the forefront in this first main section of the letter. It's hard to think of a bigger, more pressing, more depressing, more complicated, more disheartening, more seemingly insolvable problem in the "institutional" Christian church today than disunity and disharmony. This problem plays out on nearly every level of the church's life and existence: denominational divisions, opposing "political parties" within church bodies, disunity and disharmony within individual congregations. Is there any real solution to this problem?

In a sinful world and church, there is no perfect solution. Scratch that: There is a perfect solution. Paul describes it — JESUS! — in verses 5-11 of chapter 2, even if we as sinners will always struggle to "implement" this solution perfectly in our personal and corporate Christian lives.

But here's the bottom line. Unity in the church is crucial for the preservation and persuasive confession of the truth of the Gospel, which alone gives life to the church and holds out hope for the life of the world. And genuine unity, says Paul, is only possible through utter humility, which can be found only in Christ alone.

### Chapter 1, Verses 27-30: A Life Worthy of the Gospel

*"Let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ"* (verse 27): It's all about the Gospel for Paul. It's all about Christ alone. To live is Christ: There is no life without Christ, and the only "worthwhile" way to live is in and through Christ. What do you think Paul means by a "life worthy of the Gospel?" Is it really possible to live in a way that is "worthy of the Gospel?" Discuss.

*"Standing firm in one spirit"* (verse 27): Notice how Paul pastorally and evangelically hammers away at the theme of unity in these closing verses of chapter one and in the opening verses of chapter two. What are some of the different words and expressions he uses to convey the concept of unity here? What can we glean from the text

about why unity among brothers and sisters in Christ is so vitally important to Paul — and to Jesus? (cf. v. 27: "for the faith of the Gospel").

*"Believe ... suffer"* (verse 29): Here's a nice little two-word summary of what it means to be a Christian: 1) believe and 2) suffer. Think of Paul's life! Yet remember how joyful he was and how abundant life in Christ was for him.

We don't know for sure who Paul's "opponents" were (verse 28), but it has been suggested that the "root error" of their teaching was "a presentation of the believer's life in terms of triumphalism and present glory. At all costs suffering and persecution must be avoided" (Martin, 34). The opponents mocked Paul for his suffering and humiliation and pointed to it as a way of demeaning Paul's apostolic authority and ministry. "Look, the 'great apostle' is rotting away prison!" Paul's answer: The cross. Jesus. Christ alone. Thus, again:

Paul's constant theme throughout this epistle is to supply a rationale for Christians in time of persecution (1:27-30), to enunciate the true motifs of Christian living under the lordship of Christ, once humbled and suffering unto death (2:1-13), and to reiterate the genius of life-in-Christ as the following of a path which is necessarily one of weakness (3:10-11) (Martin, 34).

### Question:

Is being tempted to "make some adjustments" to biblical teachings and standards of Christ-like behavior in order to avoid or minimize suffering, hostility, ridicule and persecution a problem for Christians, Christian churches and/or for *you* personally? Discuss and give examples. What problems arise when we seek to avoid "pain and suffering" for the sake of one's faith in Christ?

### Chapter 2, Verses 1-11: Christ's Example of Humility

*"In Christ"* (verse 1): There's the phrase again ...

*"Complete my joy"* (verse 2): There's that familiar "song" again ...



“*In humility*” (verse 3): The key to unity is humility. But humility “hurts” and always has.

In the Greco-Roman world, humility carried negative connotations. Self-disparagement signified that one was shamefully weak and poor. Jesus, who was “gentle and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29), gave new meaning to this quality of the Christian life. Paul here defines Christ-like humility: to consider others better than oneself (Joersz, 203).

Imagine Christ — who was “better” and “more significant” than anyone else in history — considering others “better” or “more significant” than Himself. Now that’s humility! And only that kind of humility can result in genuine unity among Christians. Discuss why this is true.

**Caution:** Some Christians and churches today seem determined to seek unity at the expense of doctrinal truth. Does the “humility” of which Paul speaks here include a willingness to compromise the clear teachings of God’s Word? Certainly not. Paul is not shy in this letter or in any of his letters about “standing firm” on the truths of God’s Word and seeking to expose and oppose false doctrine.

So, is there such a thing as “doctrinal humility?” Lutheran Bible scholar F.E.W. Mayer was convinced that there is — and that it, too, properly understood, is essential to fostering and maintaining true Christian unity. Read and discuss his comments on how such “doctrinal humility” intersects with the New Testament concept of “unity” and “fellowship”:

The New Testament *koinonia* [fellowship] will manifest itself ... by a spirit of true humility, “doctrinal” humility. Certainty of the doctrine is a God-required prerequisite of the pastor; in fact, certainty is the very nature of faith. Nevertheless, every Christian teacher in the Church as well as the layman in the pew has the old Adam, who leans toward doctrinal complacency, toward a false doctrinal security, and at times toward doctrinal arrogance. There is always the danger of falling into a *Lehrgerechtigkeit* (“doctrine-righteousness”) which is equally as ugly and equally as disastrous as *Werkgerechtigkeit* (“works-righteousness”). True humility will say with Dr. Walther [the first President of the LCMS]: “We do not belong to those who believe that their knowledge requires

no expansion nor correction.” After all, as great a theologian as Martin Luther had gathered but a few crumbs of the article of Christ, which is so rich, so deep, so all-embracing, that throughout eternity it will be our delight to study the marvelous depth of God’s mysterious being. In the New Testament *koinonia*, the elder shares the simple faith of the child; the learned theologian in the remarkable insights of the humble peasant; the successful pastor in the victory of the experienced Christian in the pew; yes, and more often than may appear, the orthodox theologian not only gives to, but also receives from, a heterodox teacher some spiritual gift. This is the glory of the New Testament fellowship, that every Christian shares in all humility, but also in deep gratitude the manifold blessings of all (“The New Testament Concept of Fellowship,” Concordia Theological Monthly XXIII [September 1952]: 643-644).

### Questions:

Let’s use Mayer’s reference to “a few crumbs of the doctrine of Christ” as a transition into pondering just a “few crumbs” of the great “Christ-hymn” found in verses 5-11. Discuss these observations and questions:

- This is “one of the most profound Christological passages in the New Testament. Yet, profound as it is, Paul includes it mainly for illustrative purposes” (NIV CSSB, 1815). This comment may seem a bit “dismissive” — as if primary and profound doctrinal truths are being “used” here by Paul for a “less primary and profound” purpose.

Discuss: In what sense are matters of “Christian doctrine” more important than matters of “Christian ethics,” that is Christian attitudes and actions? How are the two intimately related? How are they “united” in Christ?

- Remember the NSYR observations that “young people often don’t understand the Gospel and who Jesus is.” Here is a passage that tells us very clearly, succinctly and powerfully who Jesus is. Exactly what does this passage tell us about Jesus? What surprises you most about what this passage says about Jesus? What challenges you most? What comforts you most?

- Precisely because this passage is so Christologically profound, parts of it can be seriously misunderstood. Consider, for example, the phrases in this hymn that say that Christ “made himself nothing” and “took the form of a servant” (verse 7). “Some have taken [these expressions] to mean that Jesus actually exchanged His divine nature for human nature. Others have concluded that He was only a man who appeared to be divine. Still others have said that Jesus did not actually become human, but only appeared to be in human form” (Joersz, 204). These false teachings and misunderstandings surfaced in the earliest days of the Christian church — Paul battled them even in his own writings.

Out of these controversies arose a great blessing from God: ancient Christian *creeds* that properly summarize the biblical truths about “who Jesus is” as true God and true man and how He is related to the other two persons of the Trinity. As time allows, review these creeds especially the three ecumenical creeds — Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian Creed — and also, perhaps, the less-familiar Chalcedonian Creed, and discuss how they help us understand and confess who Jesus is.

For further study, delve into the treasures of the Lutheran Confessions on the subject of the two natures of Christ (e.g., FC SD VIII) and — for those hunting for “pure Christological gold” — the work of the great Reformation scholar Martin Chemnitz (the “second Martin”) on *The Two Natures in Christ*.

- Again, however, Paul’s primary purpose here is *not* to teach a graduate course on Christology but rather to nurture Christian *unity* in the Philippian congregation through the virtue of Christ-like humility. As Jesus became “nothing” for us, we are to become “nothing” for others. What a profound paradox! One of the best contemporary articulations of this paradox comes in the final paragraphs of the great Christian classic *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. Read and discuss these rare, challenging and potentially transformative insights of Lewis on what it means to “become nothing” as Christ “became nothing”:

The more we get what we call “ourselves” out of the way and let [Christ] take us over, the more truly ourselves we become. There is so much of Him that millions and millions of “little Christs,” all different, will still be too few to express Him fully ... In that sense our real selves are all waiting for us in Him. It is no good trying to “be myself” without Him.

The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in (189-190).

How do Lewis’s insights apply to you personally? How do they apply to “life together” in the church? Do you think your youth group, congregation and/or church body would be more united and harmonious if each member of the group had this attitude and strove to imitate Christ in this way? Why?

Now read Rom. 12. How does Paul apply these teachings about the “mind of Christ” to life together in the congregation at Rome? How do they apply to your youth group, congregation or church body?

## Chapter 2, Verses 12-18: Lights in the World

“*My beloved*” (verse 12): Paul really, really loves these people. What motivates you more: being truly loved by someone or being really afraid of someone? How does that apply to our relationship with God? With others?

“*Work out your own salvation*” (verse 12): Comment on this observation: “Paul suddenly switches in this verse from a doctrine of salvation by grace to a doctrine of salvation by works.” Is that comment true or false?



How does the next verse (verse 13) guard against any possible misunderstanding here? What other verses in this letter make it clear that Paul is advocating two different or contradictory “doctrines of salvation” in this letter? (See, e.g., 1:4; 3:7-11.)

So, what *does* Paul mean when he tells the Philippians and other readers of this letter to “work out their own salvation?” Why would we do this “with fear and trembling?” Think back to confirmation classes and Luther’s explanation of the Ten Commandments: “We should fear and love God so that ...”

“*Grumbling and questioning*” (verse 14): God takes “grumbling and questioning” very seriously. Can you think of specific stories in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, where God demonstrated just how serious he is about grumbling against Him and questioning His will (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-13)? Why do you think this is such a serious issue for God? How can we overcome it? (Peek ahead to Phil. 4:4-13.)

“*Shine as lights in the world*” (verse 15): How does Paul describe the kind of “world” here in which we are to “shine as lights?” Give specific examples of how the world *you* live in is “crooked” and “twisted.” Does this make “shining with the love of Christ” harder or easier? Discuss.

Can we really be “blameless and innocent” as we seek to bear witness for Christ in the world? (See Phil. 3:8-10.) How does “not grumbling” go together with “shining as lights?” In other words, why is constant grumbling and complaining such a *detriment* to our witness for Christ?

“*The word of life*” (verse 16): God’s Word alone gives life, is life, makes life worth living. Why? Because it alone “gives” us Jesus Christ, who is “the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). The more we grow in faith and conviction that God’s Word is truly “the word of life,” the more consistently and persistently we will rejoice.

“*I am glad and rejoice ... you also should be glad and rejoice*” (verse 17-18): If anybody had a “right” to complain, Paul arguably did. But there’s that Pauline “song” again — joy, joy, joy. Even when Paul was on the verge of “being poured out as a drink offering,” he is singing for joy. How do these verses explain the cause of his joy in this case?

## Chapter 2, Verses 19-30: Timothy and Epaphroditus

We have already noted and discussed several times the deep bond between Paul and his “son” in the faith, Timothy, and his “brother” in the faith, Epaphroditus. Read these verses and discuss how Paul’s deep affection and gratitude for these friends and co-workers is reflected in the language and imagery he uses here.

Note especially his words in verse 29: “Honor such men.” Name some of the people in your life such as pastors, teachers, church workers, mentors, family members, friends who have most significantly guided you and supported you in your Christian life and walk thus far. Have you or do you properly “honor them” for this “sacrificial offering” on your behalf? How can you and we as a church do a better job of honoring humble and faithful servants of Christ?

We may think of Paul first and foremost as a great theologian or teacher or missionary or church planter or martyr, but we should not overlook one of the most distinctive qualities of Paul as reflected in his letters: Paul also is clearly a “people person.”

“Much as Paul loved doctrine,” says A.T. Robertson in his charming and classic 1917 book *Paul’s Joy in Christ*, “He also greatly loved people. He had a passion for folks and had hosts of friends wherever he labored and even where he had not been, as Romans 16 shows” (158). “What kind of man was Paul?” asks New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce in his book *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. Here’s part of his answer to that question: Paul, he says,

... was eminently “clubbable,” sociable, gregarious. He delighted in the company of his fellows, both men and women ... The range of his friendship and the warmth of his affection are qualities which no attentive reader of his letters can miss. There are scores of people in the New Testament who are known to us, by name at least, simply because they were friends of Paul. And in his friends he was able to call forth a devotion which knew no limits. Priscilla and Aquila risked their lives for him in a dangerous situation. Epaphroditus of Philippi overtaxed his strength and suffered an almost fatal illness in his anxiety to be of

service to the imprisoned apostle. Timothy readily surrendered whatever personal ambitions he might have cherished in order to play the part of a son to Paul and help him in his missionary activities, showing a selfless concern for others that matched the apostle's own eagerness to spend and be spent for them (457).

The second most noted trend by the NYGFSC was the use by young people of social media, note especially in this context the word "social." The third trend: "Decrease in adults making meaningful investment in youth." The fourth: Breakdown in family. Fifth: Growth in youth's

desire to lead and collaborate. Sixth: Youth's decrease in loyalty to institutions/organizations.

How are *each* of these trends relevant to the points discussed above — namely, Paul's sociable personality, his great love for and investment in people and his treatment of people like Timothy and Epaphroditus as his "real family" using words like "my son" and "my brother?" What fantastic *opportunities* for the church today does this suggest and present? How is this relevant to the main theme "In Christ alone" and to the theme of this section of the letter: "Genuine *unity* through utter *humility*?"





### III. Undeserved GRACE Received only through Faith — in Christ alone (Phil. 3:1-10).

**Summary:** “We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.” Many Lutherans have a “mantra-like” familiarity with this statement. However, for Paul, the truth summarized in the first sentence of this paragraph was more than a mere “mantra” — infinitely more. It literally meant *everything* to him. It defined him. It changed his life forever. It “set his heart free” and set him on a radically different path of life. It shaped and influenced everything he did, every word he spoke or wrote, every relationship he formed — relationships with his friends as well as his enemies. “We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.” If you find yourself slipping into a mindless, mantra-like attitude toward this stunning, life-changing truth, be of good cheer: There is an antidote. Read and meditate on Paul’s words in Phil. 3:2-10. By the power of the Holy Spirit, these words will resurrect your understanding of the true nature and power of God’s grace — through faith alone *in Christ alone*.

#### Chapter 3, Verses 1-11: Righteousness Through Faith in Christ

*Finally ... rejoice in the Lord*” (verse 1): Don’t be fooled by the word “finally” here — Paul’s “sermon” isn’t quite over yet. In fact, in some ways he’s just getting warmed up. “Finally” serves here as more of a transition term than a concluding term (e.g., “furthermore,” “moreover”).

One thing that shouldn’t surprise us at all in verse 1 is the re-emergence of that same old song, “Rejoice!” Chapter one begins with it (“making my prayer with joy,” 1:4), as does chapter two (“complete my joy,” 2:2). Chapter four, as we will see, follows suit: “My brothers, my joy and my crown” (4:1). Why should chapter three be any different?

Paul is about to launch into a tirade in this chapter — an outburst of righteous wrath against enemies who are seeking to rob his dear friends at Philippi of their joy and peace in Christ. Is righteous wrath against sin and evil inconsistent with righteous joy in the Lord? Discuss.

We can rejoice that we are rightly and soberly warned by God’s Word about teachings and practices that the devil tries to use to harm or even destroy our faith. Paul has issued these same kinds of warnings to his friends in other congregations. “To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is *safe* for you” (3:1). Discuss a time when a strong warning kept you safe and possibly even saved your life. How does God’s Word function in the same way? What warnings from God’s Word do you think are especially relevant, applicable and urgent, perhaps especially for Christian young people in today’s world and church?

*“Look out for the dogs ... the evildoers”* (verse 2): In the context of such a positive, joy-filled letter, this outburst at the beginning of chapter two is like getting splashed in the face with ice-cold water. Wake up! Obviously, the effect is intentional. Paul’s warning here, says Lenski, is “concise, crushing!” (828).

#### Questions:

- According to the NSYR, one youth-related challenge for the church today is that “anti-authoritarianism has made the church ‘weak’ in our teaching — the church needs to recapture the place of speaking and teaching with God’s authority found in His Word.” How can Paul’s letter, including this very section of his letter to the Philippians, help us in this regard? Where did Paul learn to speak with such authority? (See Matt. 7:29; 28:18.) Is there such a thing as “speaking with joyful authority?” Have you been privileged to witness it? Discuss and give examples.
- It’s noteworthy that there are no direct quotations of the Old Testament in this letter. Why? The most likely explanation is that the congregation in the city of Philippi was composed mostly of converted Gentiles, for whom the Old Testament was less familiar and resonant. Gentiles, of course, were often degraded by Jews as “dogs” because they were “unclean” from a ritually Jewish perspective. Paul smartly and defiantly turns the tables here

as he describes “dogs” as false teachers who are going from town to town trying to impose Jewish laws and customs on new converts to Christianity.

The very mention of “dogs” connoted uncleanness in Jewish minds. Dogs were a despised and repulsive animal because they ate animal flesh that was unclean (Ex. 22:31) and even human flesh (1 Kings 14:11, 16:4, 21:19, 23-24). They preyed on the sick, dying or dead (e.g., dogs devoured Jezebel after she was thrown from her window [2 Kings 9:36]; dogs scavenged around the streets and garbage dumps of the towns. Jews used the term as a derogatory title for Gentiles [Apocrypha, 1En 89:42] because Gentiles were regarded as ritually unclean and outside God’s covenant [cf. Matt, 7:6, 15:26-27]). With an ironic twist, Paul applies the word here to traveling Jewish-Christian teachers like those in Galatia (Judaizers whom Paul called the circumcision party in Gal. 2:12) who insisted that Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). For this they deserved the title “evildoers.” The biting sarcasm of Paul’s words would not have escaped such people unnoticed (Joersz, 218-219).

Read verses 2-6 and discuss:

- When we hear the term “evildoers” we probably tend to think of people who do evil things. In what way is it equally applicable to those who *teach* wrong or evil things?

Paul uses the word “flesh” four times in verses 2-4, denouncing the notion that anyone should place “confidence in the flesh” for salvation. Paul has in mind here cutting the flesh through ritualized circumcision, performing Jewish rituals and keeping rigid Jewish rules. While the particular form of “putting confidence in the flesh” may not be as relevant to the specific religious context most of us find ourselves in today, “trusting in one’s self” for salvation is as big a problem as ever. Think of Adele’s song in the introduction: “Next time I’ll be braver, I’ll be my own savior.” In what ways do you see people today “putting confidence in the flesh” (i.e., themselves) for salvation? In what ways are you tempted to do this?

- Why is Paul so upset and angry at the particular false teachings of this group of people? Why

does he feel so personally justified in “calling their bluff” when it comes to exposing the emptiness of this particular false teaching? (See especially verses 4-6.)

Lenski notes that “these Judaizers established no congregations of their own, they bled into sound congregations that had been built up by others” (828). How do you see this happening today through the efforts of quasi-Christian teachers or “ministries?” Discuss how the teachings of such people or groups typically point people to themselves (e.g., their own experiences, their own “faith” and spiritual “growth,” their spiritual and financial gifts, etc.) rather than to “Christ alone” for salvation. How can we most effectively warn Christians against such false teachings and teachers?

- One reason such false teachings are often so effective is because they dole out sweet-sounding promises: Do this, believe this, follow me, contribute to my ministry — and God will bless you, “prosper” you, heal you and keep you from pain and suffering. Do you hear this kind of “false Gospel” being proclaimed today? What’s so harmful about it? Why is it so utterly inconsistent with the Gospel of Christ (review again the great Christ-hymn in Phil. 2:6-11, and Paul’s two-word summary of the authentic Christian life in Phil. 1:19, “believe and suffer”).

*Glory in Christ Jesus* (verse 3) ... *for the sake of Christ* (verse 7) ... *knowing Christ Jesus my Lord* (verse 8) ... *that I may gain Christ* (verse 8) ... *through faith in Christ* (verse 9): What’s the opposite of “putting confidence in the flesh?” It’s pretty obvious: putting confidence *in Christ alone*. Read verses 7-9 out loud. Then discuss:

- What do you find most moving and powerful about Paul’s confession of faith in these verses? Can you make this confession with as much conviction as Paul? Why or why not?
- Three times in verses 7-8 Paul says that he counts “everything as loss” compared to the “surpassing worth” of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. How much had Paul “lost” for the sake of Christ? What had he gained? Do you think you would be willing to lose everything for the sake of Christ, if necessary? What, if anything, have you “lost” for the sake of Christ? What have you gained?



- The King James Version translates the word “rubbish” in verse 8 as “dung.” Paul is basically saying: You can take all of my accomplishments, good qualities, good works, titles, degrees, trophies, etc., you can pile them up in a big pile and they would amount to nothing but a pile of steaming manure — if you compare them to the privilege and gift of knowing Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Is Paul saying that all human efforts and accomplishments are meaningless — worth nothing more than a pile of manure? If not, what is he saying?

- Read and discuss the following commentary from the Lutheran Confessions on this passage from Philippians:

If anyone wants to drag good works into the article of justification, rest his righteousness or trust for salvation on them, and merit God’s grace and be saved by them, Paul himself answers, not us. He says and repeats three times (Phil. 3:7-8) — such a person’s works are not only useless and a hindrance, but are also harmful. This is not the fault of the good works themselves, but of the false confidence placed in the works, contrary to God’s clear Word (FC SD IV 37).

- One of the most clear, concise and beautiful summaries of Paul’s words in Phil. 3 is found in Article IV of the core and foundational Lutheran confession, the Augsburg Confession.

**Challenge:** Make it a goal personally and/or as a group to memorize this one-sentence summary of Paul’s doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone as taught by Scripture:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us (Tappert, 30).

*“That I may know him”* (verse 10): Obviously, Paul already “knows” Christ — but his constant goal in life is to know Him better and better day by day (cf. Phil 1:9; also Eph. 3:14-19: “to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”).

Since Christ came for the very purpose of suffering and dying for our sins, it’s impossible to grow in the knowledge of Christ without also in some measure “sharing his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). We are saved by the sufferings of *Christ alone*, not in any way or in any degree by our own sufferings — but our sufferings for the sake of Christ are used by God to help us grow in the knowledge of Christ and in Christian maturity. Discuss: How has God used suffering in your life to help you grow in your faith and Christian maturity? How have you seen this happen in the lives of other Christians?

*“That by any means possible”* (verse 11): Paul is not questioning or doubting whether he will “attain the resurrection from the dead” through faith in Christ. The only thing in doubt is the *means* by which he will do so: martyrdom? Natural death? Eyewitness to Christ’s second coming? The same, of course, is true for us. In the meantime, we trust *in Christ alone*, bear witness to *Christ alone*, endure suffering according to God’s will for our lives for the sake of *Christ alone* and “press on.” That’s Paul’s theme and “song of joy” in the next section.

## IV. Divine POWER to “Press on Toward the Goal” Despite Earthly Resistance — in Christ alone (Phil. 3:12-4:1).

**Summary:** Maybe it’s because I’m a child of the 60s and a big Bob Dylan fan, but I can’t think of a better summary of Paul’s words in this section of his letter than the lyrics of Dylan in his song “Pressing On” from his 1980 album “Saved.” Since we’ve talked about other “songs” in this study (Adele’s songs, the Gettys’ songs, the great Christ-song in Phil. 2, Paul’s “song of joy” throughout this letter), why not one more? Better yet, as you read Dylan’s lyrics below, listen to the unforgettable rendition of Dylan’s song by the Chicago Mass Choir found on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTOOHC0BAeE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTOOHC0BAeE):

*Well I’m pressing on  
Yes, I’m pressing on  
Well I’m pressing on  
To the higher calling of my Lord*

*Many try to stop me, shake me up in my mind  
Say, “Prove to me that He is Lord, show me a sign”  
What kind of sign they need when it all come from within  
When what’s lost has been found, what’s to come has already been?*

*Well I’m pressing on  
Yes, I’m pressing on  
Well I’m pressing on  
To the higher calling of my Lord*

*Shake the dust off of your feet, don’t look back  
Nothing now can hold you down, nothing that you lack  
Temptation’s not an easy thing, Adam given the devil reign  
Because he sinned I got no choice, it run in my vein*

*Well I’m pressing on  
Yes, I’m pressing on  
Well I’m pressing on  
To the higher calling of my Lord*

### Chapter 3, Verse 12 — Chapter 4, Verse 1: Straining Toward the Goal

“Not that I am already perfect ...” (verse 12): It’s almost impossible to count or keep track of the numerous theories that have been proposed by commentators regarding the number and nature of Paul’s “opponents” in this letter and their various false teachings. Lenski’s earlier caution about becoming too “ingenious” and speculative here is in order. There does seem to be enough evidence in this and other letters to suggest, however, that Ralph Martin is right when he concludes that at least one group of false teachers targeted by Paul:

... were charismatic figures who boasted of their spiritual prowess and lordly bearing, and claimed to exhibit the transcendent power of the exalted Christ in their lives and service ... They placed a high value on ecstatic visions, miracle working, rhetorical utterances that claimed to be inspired, an assertive personal demeanor, letters of commendation to validate their status and their right to financial support of the congregations, and, above all, a transcendent life-style, in which suffering and hardship were not experienced. Their influence [especially in a place like Corinth, but undoubtedly elsewhere] seems to have led to a practice of immoral ways and a claim to “perfection” (Martin, 29).

If such “divine men” were making some inroads into the congregation at Philippi, this would help explain Paul’s insistence at the beginning of this section that he makes no such claims for himself. Even apart from such false teaching, Paul’s friends at Philippi might be prone to some degree of “hero worship” in view of the amazing things that God had done through Paul, which some of them had seen with their own eyes and heard with their own ears. Read again Paul’s words in this section of the letter and discuss Lenski’s comments on these verses:

Surely, the Philippians brethren might think him a saint who was entirely finished and complete, who might well admonish others but no longer himself needed admonition. Paul cuts off such thoughts.



It is well that, like John, the other saintly apostle (1 John 1:8-10), he has done so. Lesser men have persuaded themselves that they have attained perfection in this life, have strenuously preached their perfection with great damage to themselves and others. Here is the antidote, another is offered in Rom. 7:14-25. The first of Luther's famous 95 Theses is true: "The whole Christian life is a continuous repentance" (Lenski, 848).

Review Luther's explanations in the Small Catechism of the nature and purpose of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. How do these explanations help us guard against any notion of Christian perfectionism? A couple of passages from Luther's Large Catechism may help enrich this discussion:

For by Baptism we are first born anew [John 3:5]. But, as we said before, there still remains the old vicious nature of flesh and blood in mankind ... The new life must be guided so that it continually increases and progresses (LC V 23, 25).

There are so many hindrances and temptations of the devil and of the world that we often become weary and faint, and sometimes we also stumble [Hebrews 12:3]. Therefore, the Sacrament is given as a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh and strengthen itself [Psalm 23:1-3] so that it will not fall back in such a battle, but become ever stronger and stronger (LC V 23-24).

How does the Dylan song "Pressing On" take into account these ever-present "hindrances and temptations" of the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh? What "solution" does he propose?

"*Christ Jesus has made me his own ...*" (verse 12): Ahh. This is what finally counts, what finally matters; this is the key to it all: not "us" making Christ "our own," but Christ making us His own. When and how did He do this?

"*Straining forward ... toward the goal for the prize*" (verse 13-14): The language used here, according to Martin (including the term "press on"):

... belongs to the world of both the hunter and the athlete. It is difficult to decide which meaning is uppermost since the first sense would suggest an admirable contrast between Paul's old and new life. Formerly he hunted Christians; now he "chases" the vocation of a life in Christ

and for him. However, he [also] goes on to explore fully the athlete's metaphor in the following lines (Martin, 137).

Perhaps Paul was thinking of the Olympic games. At the conclusion of each race official messengers would proclaim the winner and call the contestant up to receive the prize (a palm branch or wreath of wild olive, green parsley or pine). The term "prize" appears in this context in 1 Cor. 9:24. He fully expected to receive from his Lord the crown of righteousness reserved for him in heaven when the Lord comes on the last day (2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Cor. 9:25; cf. 1 Peter 5:4; Heb. 12:1-2) (Joersz, 226).

## Questions:

Do you find the metaphor of the Christian life as "running a race" to be helpful and meaningful? Why or why not? What potential limitations does it have?

"*Those of us who are mature*" (verse 15): What does this phrase imply about the Christian faith and life? How does it apply to you personally? What does verse 16 add?

"*Join in imitating me*" (verse 17): Isn't it a bit arrogant and perhaps even wrong for Paul to urge the Philippians to "imitate him?" Shouldn't they and we imitate "Christ alone?" Discuss.

"*Enemies of the cross of Christ*" (verse 18): Note the opening words in the Dylan song "Pressing On": "Many try to stop me, shake me up in my mind; Say, 'Prove to me that He is Lord, show me a sign.'" Can you relate to this experience in your own Christian life? How do Paul's words in Phil. 3:17-19 help you to process this and deal with it? In what way is this a crucial and inevitable part of "pressing on" in our walk with Christ toward the goal of eternal salvation?

Look again at verse 18. What does the mention of Paul's tears suggest about his feelings toward both his friends and his enemies? Do you pray specifically for your enemies and the enemies of Christ? Should you? How do you think this might affect your attitude and actions toward these people?

"*Our citizenship is in heaven*" (verse 20): Paul was certainly not reticent to claim and take advantage of the rights and benefits of his earthly Roman citizenship when appropriate and

necessary (e.g., Acts 16:35-40). This, in fact, is part of the fascinating “back story” of the founding of the church at Philippi. The Christians at Philippi were undoubtedly “proud” of their Roman citizenship in ways similar to the patriotism we as Americans often feel. But, discuss: Is it possible for “love of country” to compete with or get in the way of “love of Christ?” Which is more important: our heavenly citizenship or our earthly citizenship? Is it possible for these two kinds of citizenships to be in conflict or in tension with each other, even in America? Give specific examples. What challenges come with striving to live faithfully as “citizens” of two very different kingdoms at the same time? (Compare, e.g., Rom. 13:1-7 and Acts 5:27-29.) How does it help to remember “who’s really in charge” and what our ultimate goal and destination is (see Phil. 3:21)?

*“Therefore ... stand firm ... my joy and crown ... my beloved” (4:1):* Paul ends this section

singing (again) an exuberant song of joy “in the Lord” as he (again) expresses his deep affection for his friends at Philippi:

Like a star athlete wearing a victory prize of the highest honor (e.g., a token of victory in the World Cup), Paul was bursting with pride over the Philippians. Parents glow with pride when their children receive honors at awards ceremonies. Paul can hardly wait until the Lord comes, so he can boast about the Philippians (cf. 1Th 2:19) ... Twice [in this one verse] Paul calls them beloved (Joersz, 228).

Consider the following statement: “Knowing that someone really, truly loves me helps me ‘press on’ through difficult times.” How is this true in your life? Is the love of “Christ alone” — and no one else — enough to enable you to “press on?” Is it possible to answer both “yes” and “no” to the previous question? Explain your answer. Now re-read Phil. 1:3-11. How do these two sections of the letter inform and enrich each other?





## V. All-Sufficient Strength (joy, peace, contentment) to SERVE Selflessly and Sacrificially — in Christ alone (Phil. 4:2-23).

**Summary:** Although it would be impossible to rank the various sections or chapters of this precious little letter in value or importance, full disclosure constrains me to reveal that this is my favorite part of the letter. In my view, Paul has saved the best for last in this letter as he is occupied with thoughts of his last days and *the* last day. Phil. 4 is, in fact, one of the “go to” chapters in the entire New Testament for me when I am feeling anxious or discouraged or sapped of strength or joy. I’m sure I’m not alone in this regard. Herein are the “Pauline secrets” to authentic Christ-centered peace, prayer, joy, contentment, courage, inner strength, generosity, charity, self-control, selflessness, basically, the fruit of the Spirit we see listed in Gal. 5. If we cannot “imitate” Paul (3:17) with perfect consistency, we can at least learn from him and of him — and keep pressing on.

For the most part, this section of the letter needs little commentary or explanation. It is best savored, soaked up, memorized and meditated on again and again and again ... until, perhaps, by the power of God’s own Spirit working through Paul’s words we will imbibe some of this “peace of God, which surpasses understanding,” which will then “guard our hearts and minds *in Christ Jesus*” (Phil. 4:7).

### Chapter 4, Verses 2-3: Two Dear Women

“The most incredible feature in the Paul of popular mythology is his alleged misogyny [hatred or dislike of women],” F.F. Bruce rightly notes (*Paul*, 457). Paul’s teachings about the God-designed relationship between wives and husbands (e.g., Eph. 5:22-33) and about the proper and God-pleasing role of women in the church (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:8-15) are strengthened, not weakened or contradicted, by Paul’s naming and commending of women as his friends, supporters and co-workers throughout his writings. What significance does this have for the issue of “women in the church,” including in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod today?

If readers of Scripture recognize the names of Paul’s friends, Euodia and Syntechē, they

probably and unfortunately tend to think of them somewhat negatively — “Oh, yeah, those are the two women in Philippi who Paul scolds for bickering.” Stop right there. First, he doesn’t “scold” them. He doesn’t even “lecture” them. Rather, he “entreats” them. As the church father Marius Victorinus notes on this passage, Paul says, “I do not command or order; I ask” (ACCNT, 280). Such is the respect and love he has for them, and the *trust* he has in them, that recognize the wisdom and benefit of his urging for them and for the whole congregation.

Indeed, how strong this trust and Paul’s relationship with them must have been to identify them *by name* in this letter with this kind of entreaty! Can you imagine your pastor “entreating” you publicly in this way in his sermon or in the church newsletter? Most of us would probably start “church-shopping” the very next day. But Paul has such confidence in these beloved friends who have “labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers” that he can address them by name in a letter that would be passed on not only to the whole church at Philippi but to the whole Christian church down through the ages. So, Chrysostom:

Do you see how great is the virtue of these women according to his testimony? As great as that which Christ told his apostles ... *your names are written in the book of life* ... Did they toil with him? Yes, he says. They contributed in no small part. Even though there were many fellow workers, yet in many affairs they also took a hand. Great therefore was the cohesion of the church at that time when the most respected, whether men or women, enjoyed such honor from the rest (ACCNT, 280).

### Questions:

What can we learn from this little passage about Paul’s “preventative” approach to seeking and preserving unity in the church? We can all tell our share of “sad stories” about arguments and divisions and “bickering” in the church. Can you tell a “happy story” from your own experience about relationships restored and divisions healed

through the repentance, forgiveness and the healing power of God's Spirit?

## Chapter 4, Verses 4-7: Joy, Prayer and Peace

If you do not already have these verses memorized, I “entreat” you to do so. Now. Commit these words to memory before you get distracted by “more urgent” tasks. The few minutes it will take you to memorize these few verses of Scripture may well save you hours, days, perhaps even years of useless, faithless, faith-destroying fretting and agonizing over “stuff” that is far beyond your power to control or wisdom to understand. If you are looking for a “mantra” to carry with you day by day, moment by moment, through every circumstance of life — here it is. Choose it and use it. The Word of God is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12) — and the devil is cowed by and terrified of every sharp-edged syllable of this passage of Scripture.

Here are a couple of further worthy points to ponder from wise father Chrysostom:

Here is a medicine to relieve grief and every bad circumstance and every pain. What is it? To pray and give thanks in everything. [God] does not wish that a prayer be merely a petition but a thanksgiving for what we have received ... How can one make petitions for the future without a thankful acknowledgment of past things? ... So one ought to give thanks for everything, even what seems grievous ... Grief comes out of the circumstances with their demands. Thanksgiving comes from a soul that has true insight and a strong affection for God (ACCNT, 282).

It's tempting to read of the peace “which surpasses understanding” in a sort of mystical, experiential way. And it's true that sometimes we may catch ourselves at peace when even we ourselves can't comprehend how that can be possible under the circumstances. But Chrysostom has another, perhaps greater, insight into the meaning of this sentence: The peace that God gives us as a result of Scripture-filled and Christ-centered prayer and thanksgiving will surpass the understanding of those around us — especially our enemies. This peace:

... transcends every human intellect and all speech. For [God's] enemies, for those who hated him, for the apostates [unbelievers] — for all these he did not refuse to give his only begotten Son, so as to make peace with them ... The peace which will preserve us is the one of which Christ says, *My peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. For this peace passes all human understanding.* How? When he sees that we should be at peace with the unrighteous, with those who display contentiousness and hostility toward us, how does this not pass human understanding? (ACCNT, 282).

And, needless to say, what a powerful witness to the world of Christ's peace this is!

## Chapter 4, Verses 8-9: Now Here's Something to Think About

There are all kinds of versions of positive thinking, but what Paul urges in these verses is something different. It's totally unique because Jesus is totally unique. There is nothing and no one like him, and Paul urges us here and throughout this letter to get our minds right in a very unique, specific, particular way: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (2:5).

Note the list of “things” Paul urges us to “think about” in this passage, and then engage in this “thought experiment”: What is true? Answer: Jesus. What is honorable? Jesus. What is just? Jesus. What is pure? Jesus. What is lovely? Jesus. What is commendable? Jesus. What is excellent? Jesus. What is worthy of praise? Jesus. Now that's something — Someone — to think about, day in and day out. That blows positive thinking out of the water because it doesn't involve some kind of mind game or mental gymnastics in which we try to block out negative thoughts and focus on the positive. Jesus can handle it all, from the most positive to the most negative. He has experienced it all and suffered it all: from the glories of heaven to the divine wrath of God on the cross, from unlimited power to utter weakness, from the everything of omnipotence to the nothingness of sacrificial servanthood. So, whatever you're going through, think about *Him*. “And the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:9).



## Chapter 4, Verses 10-20: The Secret: Contentment, Strength, Generosity through Christ Alone

*“I rejoiced in the Lord ...”* (verse 10): Paul *rejoicing* again? What’s up with that?

This time he’s rejoicing as usual, not in some change or improvement in his personal circumstances, but in the opportunity provided by his *lack* of improvement in outward circumstances for the Philippians to exercise their “faith active in love.” I rejoice, says Paul, “that you have revived your concern for me” (verse 10), that you have so kindly chosen “to share my troubles” (verse 14), that you have “entered into partnership with me [cf. 1:5] in giving and receiving” (verse 16) in a way that exceeded the generosity of any other church (verse 15).

This brings us to a topic we have not spent much time discussing thus far — Paul’s gratitude for the Philippians’ remarkable and sacrificial generosity, both in terms of human resources (e.g., Epaphroditus) and financial resources. Some see this as Paul’s main motivation for putting pen to paper: “Paul’s primary purpose in writing this letter was to thank the Philippians for the gift they had sent him upon learning of his detention at Rome (1:5; 4:10-19)” (CSSB, NIV, 1971). If it was not *the* primary purpose for writing, it was at least one of the purposes for doing so. And like everything else in this letter and in Paul’s life and ministry, the theme of Christian stewardship and generosity finds its source and issue in Christ himself.

Note how Martin Franzmann begins his introduction to the captivity letters of Paul:

Paul went from Corinth to Jerusalem. It was a Christ-like way that he went; it was a way of love, for he went bringing gifts. “I came to bring to my nation alms and offerings,” he says at his trial before Felix (Acts 24:17). He attached great importance to these alms and offerings, for he saw in them the concrete expression of what he had written to the Corinthians concerning the members of the body of Christ: “If one suffers, all suffer together” (1 Cor. 12:26); in these gifts from Gentile to Jew he saw the miracle of the unity of the church being enacted (Rom. 15:25-29; cf. 15:7-9). And so he requested the prayers of the Roman

church for a safe journey and a successful mission, “so that by God’s will I may come to you *with joy*” (Rom. 15:32).

Paul knew that the way he was going was a dangerous one (Rom. 15:31) ... And yet he went willingly and resolutely to Jerusalem, “ready to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13) if need be, for he saw in this bringing of gifts to Jerusalem a piece of the ministry which he had received from the Lord Jesus, “to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24) ... I came to bring *to my nation* alms and offerings,” Paul said pointedly at his trial (Acts 24:17); he evidently hoped that the sight of gifts pouring into Jerusalem from Gentile lands, lands to which the Jew had hitherto looked in vain for kindness, might open the eyes of at least some to the grace of God, to the “inexpressible gift” of God (Franzmann, 119-120).

Franzmann continues now with the connection to the church at Philippi:

The generosity of the Philippians was so genuinely rooted in Christ and the Gospel that Paul felt free to accept gifts from them; he can call them his “partners” in the proclamation of the Gospel (Phil. 1:5, 4:15). They supplied his wants in Thessalonica (Phil. 4:16) and again in Corinth (2 Cor. 11:9), and that too at some sacrifice to themselves; Paul told the Corinthians, “I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you” (2 Cor. 11:8). This same actively generous partnership in the Gospel had moved the Philippians (and the other churches of Macedonia) to contribute to the collection for the Jerusalem saints “beyond their means,” even in the midst of a “severe test of affliction” and in the depths of poverty (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

The coming of Epaphroditus was another link in the golden chain of Philippi’s gracious generosity. Still suffering persecution (Phil. 1:29), still poor (Phil. 4:19), the men and women of Philippi had nevertheless gathered a gift for Paul ... They had sent the gift to Paul by the hand of one of their number, Epaphroditus, and had instructed him to remain in Rome with Paul and to minister to his need (Phil. 2:25). Epaphroditus had delivered the gift and had performed his task of ministry with

such self-forgetting devotion that “he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life” to complete the service of the Philippian Christians to their apostle (Franzmann, 138).

When it comes to the church’s mission to spread the Gospel of Christ, it’s not “all about the money.” But the church’s mission to spread the Gospel can’t happen without human and financial resources. Full-time church workers must be paid. Places of worship need brick and mortar and maintenance. No money, no LCMS Youth Gathering and no youth ministry staff.

It’s interesting to me and somewhat disconcerting that in the materials that I see and read about contemporary youth ministry, including the NSYR and NYGFSC notes and summaries, little or no attention seems to be paid to the issue of Christian stewardship among young people. Why? Some might suggest as one reason that most kids “don’t have much money in the first place” — but obviously that’s not the issue. For one thing, young people clearly do have *some* money from some source or sources — most seem to have enough money to purchase and upgrade their phones and other electronic devices, download their favorite music, keep current with the latest entertainment and find a way to get from “here to there” transportation-wise.

However, very little of this money regardless of its source seems to end up in the offering plate on Sunday morning or is directed toward some other effort to spread the Gospel of Christ. So it bears considering and discussing: If it’s true that genuine Christian generosity is “genuinely rooted in Christ and His Gospel” (Franzmann, 138), what does this say about the apparent lack of emphasis on and teaching about Christian stewardship among youth and adults in many churches today? The point is not that “the church wants money from kids” but that we want young people to know the rich *blessings* of Christian stewardship and generosity. As Paul says to the Philippians, “Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the *fruit* that increases to *your* credit.” Discuss.

The key to *generosity* in Christ, Paul suggests in this closing section of his letter, is *contentment* in Christ. The “spacious generosity” of Paul

and his Philippian friends and co-workers, says Franzmann, ultimately came from freedom: “freedom from the cruelly competitive scrabble of this world which only he [or she] possesses whose ‘commonwealth is in heaven,’ who is heir to all that is Christ’s, heir to the new world of God, in which he shall reign with Christ” (145). Martin Luther reminds us that “the desire for wealth clings and sticks to our nature all the way to the grave.” But God says in the words of Luther:

Whatever you lack of good things, expect it from me. Look to me for it. And whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl and cling to me. I, yes I, will give you enough and help you out of every need. Only do not let your heart cleave to or rest on any other (LC I 4).

## Questions:

Read verses 10-20 again and discuss:

- Do you think that a lack of contentment is a major problem for the people you know and hang out with on a regular basis? How does this lack of contentment manifest itself in their lives, priorities, actions and attitudes? Do you think it is a major problem for you?
- Can you say what Paul says in Phil. 4:12 and really mean it? Why or why not? If not, would you like be able to say this? What’s “scary” about answering “yes” to this question?
- Paul says, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” What do you think he means by this? What are the key words in this brief verse in your opinion?
- Read again the words of Paul in verse 19 and think about F.F. Bruce’s depiction of Paul as the “apostle of the heart set free.” If, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we could really believe these words and live by them, in what ways would it “set us free?” Free from what? Free *for* what?
- Our greatest and deepest needs will be “supplied” by God’s riches “in glory” — i.e., when Christ comes again and takes us to our heavenly home. How does this knowledge set us free to be “wildly generous” with our gifts and service to others? What is the sobering alternative? (See Phil. 3:19.)



## Chapter 4, Verses 21-23: Final Greetings

Paul closes his letter to the Philippians in the standard way, which seems quite appropriate for this “most letter-like” of his letters. He does not single out anyone by name, either in Rome or in Philippi. His mind is on “all the saints” together and “every saint” in particular, both with him and waiting for him back in Macedonia.

So was the “final greeting” of this letter literally his “final greeting” to the saints at Philippi? Did he see them again face to face? The answer is almost certainly: yes. “That Paul was released at the end of the two years’ imprisonment recorded in Acts 28:20 (A.D. 61) seems certain: there is really no evidence at all that his first Roman imprisonment ended in martyrdom.” And clearly, “Paul intended to revisit his former mission fields in Asia and Macedonia (Philemon 22; Phil. 2:24); the Pastoral Letters indicate that he carried out this intention” (Franzmann, 149-150). “I hope to send Timothy to you soon,” Paul says to the Philippians, “and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also” (2:24).

Yet, lest we forget, Paul was torn. Maybe we are too, especially in times of suffering or failing health, or as we witness the world around us becoming more and more “crooked and twisted” (Phil. 2:15) as more and more people seem to “glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:19). Paul was literally “ready to go,” ready to “know [Christ] and the power of his resurrection ... becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10-11). But God had other plans for him, primarily to strengthen and bless others through him. As far as you and I know at this moment, that is also his

plan for us. So we say with Paul: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

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 will 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 (Phil.  
1:23-26).

“For your progress and joy in the faith.” Where have we heard that song before? “Joy is the music that runs through this epistle, the sunshine that spreads over all of it. The whole epistle radiates joy and happiness.” How in the world is that possible? ***In Christ alone.***

*In Christ alone my hope is found  
He is my light, my strength, my song  
This cornerstone, this solid ground,  
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.  
What heights of love, what depths of peace,  
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!  
My comforter, my all in all  
Here in the love of Christ I stand.*

*No guilt in life, no fear in death  
This is the power of Christ in me  
From life's first cry to final breath.  
Jesus commands my destiny.  
No power of hell, no scheme of man,  
Can ever pluck me from His hand  
'Til He returns or calls me home  
Here in the pow'r of Christ I'll stand.*



# Appendix

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(RESOURCES IN BOLD PRINT ESPECIALLY RECOMMENDED.)

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# About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Joel Lehenbauer serves as the 2016 LCMS Youth Gathering theological adviser. This will be his fourth Gathering, having served in the same capacity in 1998, 2007 and 2013. Lehenbauer is the executive director of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR). He has been an executive CTCR staff member since 1991. He previously served as a parish pastor in Hillsdale, Mich. He speaks frequently at church conferences on a variety of theological topics. He attended Valparaiso University and Concordia University, Ann Arbor, Mich. He received his Master of Divinity, Master of Sacred Theology and doctorate from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He and his wife, Hope, live in Union, Mo., and have four grown children and two grandchildren.

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