

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 6

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

THE BACKGROUND

In writing to the Philippian Christians, Paul followed the customary format of letters in his day. He began with a greeting in which he identified himself as the writer and included Timothy, his coworker. Paul addressed all the Philippian Christians and specifically mentioned “overseers and deacons” (1:1). Then he included a prayer that believers receive “grace and peace” from God and Christ (1:2).

In 1:3-8, Paul stated his gratitude for the Philippian Christians and assured them of his continuing prayers for them. They had assisted him in his efforts to spread the gospel, so a strong bond existed between them. With genuine affection, he missed them.

Paul revealed the specifics of his prayer for his friends (1:9-11). He prayed that their love would be informed and would continue to grow so they would be “pure and blameless” when Christ returned (1:10). He wanted them to yield a harvest of righteousness that Christ alone could produce in them (1:11).

1. GRACE-FILLED FRIENDSHIP (PHILIPPIANS 1:1-2)

Verse 1: *Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus: To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.*

Paul was in prison in Rome, probably about A.D. 63. The Philippian believers had learned of his location and had sent a church member to deliver a gift to him and to stay with him. The representative had become gravely ill but had recovered. Paul was sending this church member back with a letter that in part explained the member’s early return. Paul’s letter also gave information about his situation, addressed problems in the church, and expressed appreciation for the Philippian believers’ support.

Paul identified himself and greeted the Philippian believers. His including Timothy in the greeting doesn’t indicate Timothy cowrote the letter; rather, Timothy was Paul’s valued coworker who had been with the apostle in Philippi on the second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-12). The Philippian Christians knew and respected Timothy (see 2:22). Thus Paul included his fellow missionary in his greeting.

With genuine humility, Paul described himself and Timo-

thy as slaves of Christ Jesus. The Greek word translated “slaves” literally means “bondslaves.” The noun probably comes from a verb that means “to tie” or “to bind.” A bondslave was totally subservient to his master’s will. Paul and Timothy were at their Lord’s disposal. The phrase Christ Jesus identified Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and Savior.

Paul’s letter was inclusive. He addressed it to all the Philippian believers. He used the word all nine times in his letter — perhaps to stress that he excluded no one from his deep love or from his gratitude for the church’s expression of care for him. He also may have wanted to underscore at the letter’s beginning that the congregation was to be united.

The word “saints” should be understood as a synonym for “Christians.” It doesn’t refer to an elite category of superspiritual believers but to all people redeemed by grace through faith in Christ — people set apart for God’s service and for living by His lofty standards. All Christians are in Christ Jesus — they live in the sphere of His lordship. Paul’s phrase “in Christ” was another way to designate people committed to Christ.

Paul included the church’s overseers and deacons in his greeting. At this time in church history, these terms primarily designated functions, not offices. Overseers probably were elders — older men with leadership responsibilities. Deacons were involved in ministering to church members’ needs. Paul may have mentioned these church leaders in particular because they had recommended and supervised the collection of the church’s gift to him.

Verse 2: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul’s consistent prayer for recipients of his letters was grace and peace. Grace is God’s undeserved favor — His love in action. Peace is wholeness or soundness under His rule. Paul never varied the order of the terms; only on the basis of God’s grace is wholeness possible.

As Father in the best possible sense, God provides grace and peace. Through faith in Christ, we become members of His family — His children. We live in His compassionate care. Paul’s full designation the Lord (Deity) Jesus (Savior) Christ (Messiah) emphasized the Son’s role in supplying grace and peace.

2. FRIENDSHIP THAT PERSEVERES (PHILIPPIANS 1:3-6)

Verse 3: *I give thanks to my God for every remembrance of you,*

In Paul’s time, letter writers typically followed a greeting with an expression of thanks for the recipient or recipients. In Philippians 1:3, Paul sounded a strong, affectionate note of gratitude for his Philippian friends. The warmth and sincerity of his appreciation is prominent throughout the letter. Paul’s phrase “my God” reflected his close, personal relationship with the Lord. In his conversations with God, Paul remembered his positive, productive experiences with the Philippian Christians. Literally, he wrote: “I give thanks to my God for ‘all’ remembrance of you.” Paul may have meant that as he surveyed all his interactions with them, he expressed gratitude for the whole experience. Another possibility is that every time he prayed on their behalf, he thanked God for them.

Verse 4: *always praying with joy for all of you in my every prayer,*

Consistently, Paul entreated God on the Philippian believers’ behalf. The word “praying” (literally, “making supplication”) conveys continuous action and has the idea of asking God to meet a need.

Paul prayed for his friends with joy because of his warm recollections of them and because of their faithfulness. He sounded for the first time what would become a prominent note in his letter: joy. The Greek word for joy comes from the same root as the term “grace.” It conveys not just the emotion of happiness but also the sense of confident well-being that comes from a close relationship with God. Paul prayed for the Philippian Christians with settled confidence arising from their mutual relationship with God.

Verse 5: *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

In particular, Paul’s petitions for the Philippian believers were infused with joy because of their partnership in the gospel. The term “partnership” translates the Greek word *koinonia* [KOY nuh NEE uh], which comes from a verb meaning “to share,” “to associate oneself with,” “to be made a partner.” The Philippian Christians participated in Paul’s efforts to spread the gospel; they shared his missionary zeal and contributed to his work. They had done so from the first day they responded positively to Paul’s proclamation of the gospel. Persistently, even to the time Paul was writing his letter, they helped him by sending needed resources.

Verse 6: *I am sure of this, that He who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Paul expressed his confidence in the Philippian Christians' continued spiritual growth. His certainty wasn't based on his ability or on their efforts, but on God who had started a good work in them. The phrase "good work" could refer to their cooperation with Paul in his missionary efforts, but it likely has a broader meaning. The beginning of God's good work occurred when the believers placed their faith in Christ. By His grace, God would carry their salvation on to completion. The phrase "the day of Christ Jesus" refers to His second coming. At that time, all believers will enter God's immediate presence — the culmination or fulfillment of their salvation.

3. INTIMATE FRIENDSHIP (PHILIPPIANS 1:7-8)

Verse 7: *It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I have you in my heart, and you are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and establishment of the gospel.*

Paul felt strongly that his judgment concerning all the Philippian believers was right or justified. The phrase "think this way" may refer to Paul's confidence in and affection for them or to their continued spiritual growth toward ultimate fulfillment. His valid assessment of them issued from his warm relationship with them: He held them in his heart. The Greek text also allows for the translation "because you hold me in your heart." Both translations convey a relationship marked by love.

In biblical thought, the word "heart" could designate the physical organ that pumps blood through the body, but the term also could refer to the seat of a person's emotions, intellect, and will; thus, the heart is the physical, mental, and spiritual center of a person's life. At the center of his life (and/or their lives) was a close, continuing relationship marked by mutual caring.

Paul acknowledged that his friends were partners with him in grace. The Greek term for "partners" is a form of the word rendered "partnership" in verse 5. He and the Philippian believers shared in a common enterprise: spreading the gospel. They were joint participants in God's redemptive purpose. Here the term "grace" referred to Paul's missionary ministry. Paul viewed God's calling him to take the gospel to the Gentiles as a gift; it was a privilege rather than a hardship.

The Philippian believers were partnering with Paul even in his imprisonment. They had sent material assistance by a church member, who was to stay and minister to Paul's needs. The words "defense" and "establishment" were le-

gal terms used of a formal defense in court. One view is that the words indicate Paul's trial before the emperor. An alternate view is that the terms refer to Paul's entire ordeal, that is, the hardships he endured leading to his imprisonment. In any case, Paul chose to view these as God's grace gift to him.

Verse 8: *For God is my witness, how deeply I miss all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*

The term "for" links Paul's strong bond of fellowship with and shared affection for his friends (1:7) with his longing to see them. With a solemn oath, he declared his intense, eager yearning to be reunited with them. Christ Jesus was the Source of Paul's deep desire. "Affection" translates a Greek term that conveys the sense of compassion or tender mercies. Through Paul, Christ's love reached out to his friends.

4. PURPOSE-DRIVEN FRIENDSHIP (PHILIPPIANS 1:9-11)

Verse 9: *And I pray this: that your love will keep on growing in knowledge and every kind of discernment,*

Out of his deep care for his friends, Paul continually prayed for them. The word "this" emphasized the priority in his praying. He wanted their love to keep on growing. The term "love" carries the idea of a determined good will that seeks others' best interests, even at cost to the person extending good will. Thus loving others is a deliberate choice to go on acting in their best interest even in the face of rejection. The words "will keep on growing" translate a Greek phrase that literally reads "may more and more abound." Paul prayed that their determined good will would go on increasing to the point of overflowing so they could be and do all God wanted.

Paul was not subtly requesting more help (4:18). He genuinely wanted believers to continue growing toward spiritual maturity. As they did so, they presumably would continue to take part in spreading the gospel. Paul certainly wanted this participation to continue, regardless of whether it was with him, with someone else, or on their own.

Paul pointed to two areas in which he prayed that the Philippian Christians' love would overflow: knowledge and every kind of discernment. The word "knowledge" has the idea of full knowledge gained from experience in close relationship with Christ. The term "discernment" conveys the sense of acute moral perception. Christian love must be informed and insightful.

Verse 10: *so that you can approve the things that are superior and can be pure and blameless in the day of Christ,*

The words "so that" point to the purpose of the believers' having knowledge and moral perception. More than wanting his friends to be able to distinguish right from wrong, Paul wanted them to choose the best over the merely good. The Greek term translated "approve" has the sense of examining or testing something to verify its genuineness. It was used of testing metals to prove their purity. The Greek phrase rendered "the things that are superior" literally is "the things differing" and probably has the sense of what is excellent and worthy of being made part of believers' lives.

The Philippian Christians' ability to distinguish the excellent from the merely good would enable them to be pure and blameless in the day of Christ. The Greek word rendered "pure" may carry the sense of being judged or examined in the sunlight. Another possibility is that the term conveyed the idea of being sifted by rapid rolling. Either meaning presents the idea of being found to be free of impurities. The word "blameless" could mean either "without stumbling" or "not causing (others) to stumble." Paul likely had the latter meaning in mind. He wanted believers to be flawless in God's sight and innocent of harm in relation to people in the day of Christ — the time of Christ's return when they would face His evaluation of their lives (1:6).

Verse 11: *filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

Paul wanted his friends to be filled with the fruit of righteousness — the qualities that righteousness produces in believers. Righteousness is a right relationship with God through faith in Christ. In that relationship, Christ indwells believers and works to cause their lives to reflect His character. Christians can't generate the fruit of righteousness by their efforts; such fruit comes only through Jesus Christ.

Believers are to be filled with the spiritual qualities righteousness produces so that God will be glorified and praised. God's glory is His redemptive character revealed. Behind the Greek word is the Hebrew term that means "heavy in weight." The verb form means "to give weight to" in the sense of recognizing value or importance. We glorify God when our lives give evidence of His redemptive power and draw others to Him.

The Greek term rendered "praise" literally means "applause" or "commendation" and has the sense of recognizing or honoring someone.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 13

PHILIPPIANS 1:12-26

THE BACKGROUND

Paul began his Letter to the Philippians with a greeting, an expression of thanksgiving, and a prayer (1:1-11). Then he informed his readers of his circumstances, assured them that he was faring well and that, more importantly, the gospel was being proclaimed (1:12-26).

Paul declared that even in prison he was bearing witness of the gospel. His example encouraged others to preach courageously too (1:12-14). To be sure, some preached because they were motivated by envy. They envied Paul's reputation and success. Others, however, preached with the right motive — out of good will. Love motivated the latter. Preachers who competed with Paul tried to add to the agony of his confinement, perhaps by pointing to his imprisonment as evidence of his failure. Paul rejoiced that no matter what motivated the preachers, they were proclaiming the gospel (1:15-18).

In 1:19-26, Paul stated his conviction that his trial would result in acquittal. His greatest desire was that whether he was freed or executed, he would honor Christ. He was torn between going on living so that he could help the Philippian Christians and dying so that he could be with Christ. At this point, though, Paul was confident that he would live and thus would be able to continue helping the Philippian believers grow spiritually. He looked forward to seeing them again to bolster their confidence.

1. THAN OUR LIMITATIONS (PHILIPPIANS 1:12-14)

Verse 12: *Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has actually resulted in the advance of the gospel,*

With the word “now,” Paul transitioned from his introductory prayer for his friends to a purposeful description of his situation. He previously called his readers “partners” (1:7); in this verse he used the warmer word “brothers” to stress his close relationship with them in the family of faith. The phrase “what has happened to me” probably links Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, imprisonment in Caesarea, arduous trip to Rome, and current imprisonment. Events that might've been viewed as negative occurrences actually promoted the gospel; they worked for the gospel's advance. Paul's circumstances were furthering the gospel (Romans 8:28).

Verse 13: *so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard, and to everyone else, that my imprisonment is in the cause of Christ.*

Paul openly declared that his imprisonment was in the cause of Christ. That is, he had been arrested and confined because he was a follower of Christ who proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah and Savior. Paul had committed no crime; he wasn't a political prisoner. A trumped-up charge of taking a Gentile into the Jerusalem temple had led to his appealing to Caesar and being taken to Rome (Acts 21:26-29; 25:10-11). He was guilty only of being faithful in spreading the gospel.

The Greek term rendered “imprisonment” literally is “bands” or “bonds” — that is, “chains”. When Paul arrived in Rome, he stayed for two years in a rented house under guard (Acts 28:30). He could have been referring to the literal chains that linked him to his guard. The phrase for “in Christ” could point to the exemplary manner in which Paul bore such confinement.

Throughout the whole imperial guard, Paul made known the true reason for his imprisonment. The phrase “imperial guard” translates a borrowed Latin term that could refer either to a headquarters or to a group of soldiers. Paul likely used it here to refer to the soldiers who guarded him in shifts. He told them of his service for Christ, and the word spread to everyone else — a larger group of people who learned of his confinement and the reason for it. Paul wasn't claiming necessarily that numerous people had become Christians. Nevertheless, they understood that his only “crime” was proclaiming the gospel of salvation in Christ.

Verse 14: *Most of the brothers in the Lord have gained confidence from my imprisonment and dare even more to speak the message fearlessly.*

Paul's upbeat attitude and consistent witness in his imprisonment gave most of his fellow Christian brothers in Rome confidence. The phrase “in the Lord” may go better with the words “have gained confidence.” That is, Paul's courage under confinement inspired many Roman believers to boldly speak about the message of God's saving grace in Christ. Paul's example encouraged them, but Christ gave them confidence.

2. THAN OUR SELFISH MOTIVES (PHILIPPIANS 1:15-18A)

Verse 15: *To be sure, some preach Christ out of envy and strife, but others out of good will.*

Not everyone who preached the gospel in Rome did so

from right motives. Some preached out of envy and strife. They were antagonistic to Paul in their preaching and thus created an imperfect situation for him. The term “envy” conveys the sense of jealousy or spite. Perhaps these preachers were jealous of Paul's good reputation and the attention being given to him. The Greek word translated “strife” has the idea of contention or rivalry. Some preachers saw themselves as competing with Paul. Paul had no problem with their preaching's content. He did decry their motives. Other preachers, however, proclaimed the good news out of good will. They were kindly disposed toward Paul and demonstrated the same spirit that motivated Paul's preaching.

Verse 16: *These do so out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel;*

The properly motivated preachers proclaimed the gospel out of love for Paul and for Christ. Paul used the Greek word “agape [ah GAH pay],” the distinctive Christian term for God's kind of love. Such love goes on offering itself, even at personal cost. It's an expression of the will, not of the emotions.

The preachers who shared Paul's spirit knew that he was appointed for the defense of the gospel. Paul — and they — were convinced God had placed him in Rome so that he could present the gospel's claims. Paul's supporters knew that he was imprisoned because of his faithfulness to Christ, not because of crimes against the Roman government.

Verse 17: *the others proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely, seeking to cause me anxiety in my imprisonment.*

Paul turned again to the believers who were preaching the gospel from wrong motives. Their content was correct, yet their bold preaching arose from a sense of rivalry. The Greek term rendered “rivalry” originally referred to a spinner or worker in wool. Later it was used of people who sought to attain public office using underhanded methods. It conveyed the idea of selfish ambition, seeking a goal by any means necessary. Thus the preachers with a hidden agenda didn't proclaim the gospel sincerely; they had impure motives.

The word “seeking” translates a Greek word that means “thinking,” “supposing,” or “imagining.” The wrongly motivated preachers assumed (or hoped) their activities would cause Paul anxiety. The phrase “to cause me anxiety in my imprisonment” literally is “to raise up affliction in my chains.” That is, the envious preachers thought their freedom to minister would cause Paul's confining chains to chafe or rub him painfully.

Verse 18a: *What does it matter? Just that in every way,*

whether out of false motives or true, Christ is proclaimed. And in this I rejoice.

Paul's question didn't indicate his opponents' motives didn't matter. The idea is something akin to "What difference does that make?" The preachers' motives mattered, but what mattered most to Paul was that the good news was being spread. Even when Christ was proclaimed from impure or mixed motives, the gospel had inherent power to be effective.

3. THAN OUR FEARS (PHILIPPIANS 1:18B-20)

Verse 18b: *Yes, and I will rejoice*

Paul derived great joy from the gospel's being spread, even by preachers with wrong motives. He would continue to rejoice because of his confidence that his confinement would lead to his deliverance.

Verse 19: *because I know this will lead to my deliverance through your prayers and help from the Spirit of Jesus Christ.*

The term "this" could refer both to his imprisonment and to the preachers who sought to trouble him. The Greek word rendered "deliverance" commonly means "salvation" in the New Testament. It can also have the idea of rescue from danger. Thus Paul could've meant he was confident he would be released from prison. On the other hand, he could've meant that whatever happened to him, he would be vindicated. He was drawing on Scripture for this confidence (Job 13:16). In this view, whether Paul lived or died, he was sure he would be vindicated. He was confident that whatever happened to him, he would experience his salvation's fulfillment or completion. He would live and continue to be delivered from sin's power, or he would enter God's presence for eternity.

Intercessory prayer would be instrumental in Paul's release or vindication. Knowing that his friends continued to pray for him would encourage and strengthen him. Their praying also would issue in further expressions of care for him. Most of all, Paul would receive help from the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The phrase "the Spirit of Jesus Christ" is a synonym for the Holy Spirit. The word "help" literally is "supply" and could refer to what the Spirit would give in the way of equipping Paul or to the Spirit Himself as the Supply. Paul well may have had both ideas in mind.

Verse 20: *My eager expectation and hope is that I will not be ashamed about anything, but that now as always, with all boldness, Christ will be highly honored in my body, whether by life or by death.*

As Paul awaited his pending trial's outcome, his primary goal was to conduct himself well no matter what happened. The Greek term translated "eager expectation" presents the picture of watching with one's head stretched out, looking with focused attention. The term "hope" conveys the idea of confidence. The Greek word rendered "be ashamed" means "be put to shame," "be disgraced." Paul wanted to retain the same boldness he had demonstrated in his previous efforts to spread the gospel so that Christ would be highly honored in his body — that is, in his person. Amid the daily stress of imprisonment, and regardless of whether he lived or died, Paul wanted to magnify his Lord.

4. THAN OUR DISSATISFACTION (PHILIPPIANS 1:21-26)

Verse 21: *For me, living is Christ and dying is gain.*

If Paul's trial resulted in his release, the apostle would live for Christ in a manner that would honor Him. If he were to be executed, he would experience the immeasurable gain of being with Christ in eternity.

Verse 22: *Now if I live on in the flesh, this means fruitful work for me; and I don't know which one I should choose.*

Because of his confidence that death would be a transition to a fuller relationship with Christ, Paul was torn between living and dying. If he continued to live physically, he would have the opportunity to continue his life's work of spreading the gospel. He was genuinely perplexed about which option he should choose. The phrase "I don't know" literally is, "I don't make known" and has the sense that the choice was not Paul's to make, so he turned from it.

Verse 23: *I am pressured by both. I have the desire to depart and be with Christ—which is far better—*

Paul's options of living or of dying and being with Christ pressured him. The word "pressured" has the idea of being hemmed in, of not being able to incline toward either option. If Paul had only himself to consider, he would choose to depart and be with Christ. The word "depart" was used of breaking camp or of releasing a ship from its mooring. Paul's deepest desire was to move on into eternity with Christ. Paul termed this transition as far better for him.

Verse 24: *but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.*

However, Paul had more to consider than himself. As was characteristic of him, he put Christ's cause and others' welfare above his preference. He would rather die and enter Christ's presence in eternity, but to remain in the flesh was

more necessary for the Philippian believers. In this context, the term "flesh" indicates continued physical existence. In other contexts, Paul used the word to refer to the sphere or realm dominated by evil as opposed to life in the sphere ruled by God's Spirit (Romans 8:8-9; Galatians 5:19-26). His being acquitted and freed to continue his work was critical for the Philippian Christians' continued spiritual development. Their needs outweighed his "desire to depart and be with Christ" (1:23).

Verse 25: *Since I am persuaded of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,*

Paul was convinced that he would remain. The Greek term translated "I know" expresses full confidence, but Paul didn't necessarily mean that he had received specific divine revelation concerning the matter. Nevertheless, he was stating his Spirit-inspired conviction. The phrase "continue with all of you" looked forward to Paul's anticipated visit with his friends when he could minister to them.

Paul's being released and continuing his work would result in the Philippian believers' progress and joy in the faith. The Greek word for advancement is the same term Paul used in 1:12 for the gospel's progress. His continuing ministry on their behalf would enable them to grow toward spiritual maturity. His service also would enhance their joy as Christ's followers. The phrase "in the faith" likely refers to progress and joy in their personal faith.

Verse 26: *so that, because of me, your confidence may grow in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.*

Paul's exoneration and release would allow him to visit the Philippian Christians again. The effect of his visit would be that their confidence would grow in Christ Jesus. The Greek term rendered "confidence" has the ideas of "rejoicing" and "taking pride in." Paul's coming to them again would be the occasion for celebrating his freedom to minister, but the ground of their gratitude was Christ's mercy and grace.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 20

PHILIPPIANS 1:27–2:11

THE BACKGROUND

To recap the Letter to the Philippians thus far in our study: Paul followed the customary format of letters in his day. He introduced himself as the writer, included Timothy in his greeting, and expressed a prayer for the recipients (1:1-2). Then he expressed gratitude for his friends and wrote a prayer for them (1:3-11).

Paul quickly assured his friends that he was doing well. He was confined and awaiting trial; but far from being dejected, he rejoiced. Some believers in Rome drew courage from Paul's example and boldly proclaimed the gospel. Others were jealous of Paul and preached the gospel from selfish motives, seeking to antagonize him by flaunting their freedom as he remained confined. Yet Paul rejoiced that no matter what the preachers' motives were, the gospel was being proclaimed. His overriding desire was that whether he lived or died, he would conduct himself in a manner that would honor Christ (1:12-20).

Paul acknowledged that as he awaited trial, he was torn between two options: continuing to live, or dying and being with Christ. If he were acquitted, he could continue his work, which would be to his friends' advantage. He was convinced that indeed he would be set free and would visit the Philippian Christians again (1:21-26).

In this week's lesson, Paul used the thought of his anticipated visit as a segue to begin discussing his major concern for the Philippian believers: the church's unity. The church was faced with opponents (just as Paul was), and Paul urged the believers to stand together in one spirit as they lived out their faith (1:27-30).

As motivation for unity, Paul pointed to four of believers' deepest experiences in their union with Christ. The Philippian Christians were to avoid rivalry caused by selfish ambition (2:1-4). Then in a beautiful hymn, Paul presented Christ as the perfect Model of humble selflessness. Believers were to follow His example (2:5-11).

1. PURPOSEFUL SUFFERING (PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30)

Verse 27: *Just one thing: Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or am absent, I will hear about you that you are standing firm in*

one spirit, with one mind, working side by side for the faith that comes from the gospel,

Paul wanted his friends to demonstrate exemplary Christian conduct. The phrase “just one thing” translates a Greek word that means “only” and stresses priority. For Paul, the matter of believers' deportment as Christ's followers was of utmost importance. The phrase “live your life” carries the idea of behaving as a good citizen, of living according to a government's laws. In a broader sense, it refers to conduct in general. As citizens of God's kingdom, the Philippian Christians' daily conduct was to evidence the gospel; they were to incarnate the good news of Christ.

If Paul were able to visit his friends soon or if he were delayed, he wanted them to remain steadfast and unified as Christ's followers. The Greek term rendered “standing firm” has the sense of persevering or enduring. The phrase “in one spirit” could refer to a shared attitude or disposition or to the Holy Spirit. If Paul intended the latter, the Spirit would be the sphere in which believers maintained their faithfulness.

The Philippian Christians were to persevere with one mind (literally, “soul”). That is, they were to be unified in their loyalty to Christ, their grasp of what was involved in living for Him, and their purpose as a church. The Greek word translated “working side by side” was an athletic term that conveyed the sense of strenuous teamwork toward a common goal. Paul's use of the term may have been a subtle reminder that believers were not to contend with one another but were to be unified in presenting the gospel. The words “for the faith that comes from the gospel” could refer to the gospel's content the believers were to teach or to the act of proclaiming the gospel.

Verse 28: *not being frightened in any way by your opponents. This is a sign of destruction for them, but of your deliverance—and this is from God.*

Paul knew that the small pocket of Christians in Philippi faced ongoing opposition. He exhorted them not to be frightened by their opponents. The word “frightened” literally described a horse's being startled and bolting in terror. It carried overtones of panic or dismay. Paul didn't want believers to recoil in fear as they faced harassment.

With the word *this*, Paul likely referred to believers' courageous refusal to allow their opponents to intimidate them. Christians' perseverance would give a sign of the opponents' ultimate destruction (eternal ruin) and of Christians' ultimate deliverance — their salvation's completion

or fulfillment. The phrase *this* is from God most likely is a reference to God's sovereignty in pronouncing ultimate judgment on the gospel's opponents and bringing believers' salvation to completion.

Verse 29: *For it has been given to you on Christ's behalf not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him,*

Paul viewed suffering on Christ's behalf to be a grace gift. The opportunity and capacity to believe in Christ issued from God's grace. The term rendered “given” means “granted as a free favor.” Accepting God's grace gift carried with it the privilege of enduring hardship and opposition because of their faithfulness to Christ. Note carefully that suffering isn't a privilege; the key words are “for Him.”

Verse 30: *having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I have.*

Opposition shouldn't have surprised the Philippian believers. When Paul planted the gospel in Philippi, he experienced persecution (Acts 16:16-24). As believers there continued to advance the gospel, they could expect no less. They were engaged in the same struggle Paul waged. The Greek word translated “struggle” is the basis of our English word “agony.” It described intense exertion in athletics and gladiatorial combat. The Philippian Christians had seen the conflict Paul endured. He and they shared the common experience of suffering for Christ. Such suffering was not payment for salvation but arose in the course of their loyal service in the gospel.

2. PURPOSEFUL UNITY (PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4)

Verse 1: *If then there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy,*

Paul issued a strong appeal for unity among the Philippian believers. The word “then” probably connects the appeal with 1:27, where Paul expressed his desire that his friends work “side by side for the faith of the gospel” in the face of opposition. The phrase “if ... there is” doesn't convey doubt but has the sense of “because ... there is.” The Greek construction expresses certainty.

Paul pointed out four realities of the Christian life as grounds of his appeal. The term “encouragement” comes from a Greek verb that means “to call alongside” for the purpose of support and advocacy. A noun form (parakletos) designated the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). Paul may have used this word form in the sense of calling or summons; he assumed

they answered to Christ, who called them to unity. The phrase “in Christ” stressed their union with Christ by faith.

The Greek word translated “consolation” means “incentive,” “motivation,” “persuasion.” Agape — God’s kind of love — provides incentive for Christian unity. Paul may have appealed to their love for Christ as a ground of unity. The word “fellowship” is the same term rendered “partnership” in 1:5. Participating in the Spirit and serving under His leading, Christians are to work together. Finally, believers are to demonstrate the characteristics of affection (tender mercy, sympathy) and mercy (pity, compassion). In light of these realities, Paul made his appeal.

Verse 2: *fulfill my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, sharing the same feelings, focusing on one goal.*

Paul wanted his friends to make his joy complete by being unified. His anticipated visit with them would bring them joy (1:25). Their working together to advance the gospel would perfect his joy. They were to have the same mind-set. They might not agree on every detail, but they were to have the same disposition or purpose. They were to demonstrate the same distinctive Christian love. The phrase “sharing the same feelings” translates a Greek word that means “knit together in soul” and conveys the sense of wholehearted accord. Then Paul repeated his first admonition in a stronger way: Believers were to focus on one goal — literally, “being one-minded.” They were to have the same attitude. With these four expressions, Paul stressed his strong desire that the church be unified.

Verse 3: *Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves.*

Unity required selflessness on believers’ part. Rather than being self-centered, they were to be others-centered. They were to do nothing out of rivalry (contentious spirit; see 1:15, “strife”). They were not to be in competition with one another. Also, they were not to act out of conceit. They were not to be ego-driven. Rather, they were to conduct themselves in humility — an awareness of both strengths and weaknesses. Such a healthy, balanced view of themselves would enable them to have a proper view of others in which they sought others’ welfare. Paul didn’t mean that believers are not to give attention to personal concerns; rather, they are to recognize others’ worth and be willing to deny themselves for others’ benefit.

Verse 4: *Everyone should look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*

Believers were to give attention to their own interests; that is, they were to address their own concerns and needs. At the same time, they were to be aware of and attend to others’ concerns and needs too.

3. PURPOSEFUL ATTITUDE (PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8)

Verse 5: *Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus,*

Paul pointed his readers to Christ, the supreme Example of the proper attitude of humble selflessness. The phrase “make your own attitude” literally is “this be minded in (among) you.” The words could mean each believer was to have Christ’s mind-set or that Christians as a whole were to activate the mind-set they already had received.

Verse 6: *who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage.*

Verses 6-11 form a hymn. I believe Paul composed this hymn to point to Christ as the supreme Example of humble selflessness. The word “existing” stresses Christ’s pre-existence, His eternity. The phrases “the form of God” and “equal with God” refer to Christ’s Deity — His always having the attributes of Deity. Jesus didn’t view His Deity as something to be used to His advantage; that is, He didn’t consider Deity as a prized possession to be clutched tightly to Himself and used selfishly.

Verse 7: *Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men. And when He had come as a man in His external form,*

Rather than selfishly clasp the prerogatives of His Deity, Christ emptied Himself. Paul’s phrase doesn’t mean Christ divested Himself of Deity for a short time. In His incarnation, Christ was fully God and fully human; He never ceased to be God. Paul was referring either to Christ’s freely choosing to leave heaven’s glories for a time or to His pouring Himself out completely in selfless ministry to others.

Paul stressed that Christ took on the form of a slave. He was God incarnate, yet He came “to serve” (Mark 10:45). The phrase “taking on the likeness of men” literally is “having become in the likeness of men.” Paul’s point was that at a moment in time, Christ took on human flesh. The phrase “the likeness of men” means more than His merely appearing to be human. His external form was that of a human being, which He truly was in every respect except that He committed no sin.

Verse 8: *He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the*

point of death—even to death on a cross.

Even though Christ was Deity in human flesh, He humbled Himself. That is, He had a clear grasp of His identity as the Suffering Servant who would give Himself for people’s salvation. Instead of claiming an elevated status among His people, He chose the path of self-sacrifice. As God’s Son, Christ was consistently obedient to His Heavenly Father, even when His obedience resulted in His opponents’ putting Him to death. Moreover, in His obedience He submitted to and endured the most humiliating and painful form of execution devised to that time: death on a cross. Note the progression of intensity: obedient; obedient to death; obedient to death by agonizing crucifixion. Christ placed the Father’s will above His own (Mark 14:36).

4. PURPOSEFUL SURRENDER (PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11)

Verse 9: *For this reason God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name,*

Because of Christ’s obedience, even to the extent of voluntarily dying on a cross, God highly exalted Him. One view is that God elevated Christ to a more “superexalted” position than He had before the incarnation, while recognizing that He could be no more Deity before or after. A second view is that this exaltation referred to Christ’s resurrection and ascension — His resuming the glorious dignity He experienced before the incarnation. In either view, God turned Christ’s voluntary humiliation and sacrifice into glorious exaltation.

God also gave Christ the name that’s above every name. I believe Paul had in mind the name “Lord,” the term used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) for “Yahweh,” Israel’s covenant God. In Hebrew thought, name stood for the whole person. In Christ, God expressed His sovereign character as redemptive. No other person could equal, much less surpass, God’s exalted Son, Jesus Christ.

Verse 10: *so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow— of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth—*

Because of Christ’s exalted status, every knee will bow to Him. The construction in the Greek text expresses eventual universal acknowledgment of Christ’s sovereignty and majesty. The phrases “in heaven, on earth, and under the earth” likely refer to all intelligent beings, living and dead.

Verse 11: *and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Everyone also will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. This doesn't mean that all people will profess faith in Christ and become His followers. Believers will joyously acknowledge their Lord. Unbelievers, however, will confess because they must do so in light of clear evidence. The universal confession will be to the glory of God the Father. God's glory is His character revealed as redemptive. He revealed His character perfectly through Christ.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 27

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-30

THE BACKGROUND

In 1:27-30, Paul expressed his concern for the Philippian church's unity. He wanted the believers to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. One major way they were to do that was to be unified in their efforts to spread the gospel, even in the face of opposition. They were to view suffering for Christ as a privilege.

As grounds or motivations for unity, Paul pointed to four of believers' deepest experiences in their union with Christ (2:1-4). They were to be selfless in serving one another. In a beautiful hymn, Paul presented Christ as the perfect Model of humble selflessness (2:5-11). Believers were to follow His example.

In this week's lesson, Paul encouraged his friends to make their salvation evident in their daily living (2:12-13). With lifestyles that contrasted sharply to people around them, believers would serve as shining examples of Christianity (2:14-16).

In 2:17-30, Paul gave three examples of selfless, sacrificial service for Christ. He pointed to three believers who had Christ's mind-set and demonstrated it. First, tactfully and subtly, he indicated he had Christ's attitude, for he was willing to offer himself to the fullest extent in service for Christ. Then he presented Timothy, his coworker whom they knew, as exemplifying Christ's mind-set. Finally, he stressed that Epaphroditus, whom the Philippian Christians had sent with a gift to help Paul, exhibited Christ's attitude. These examples of Christlike self-giving would inspire believers to be superlative representatives of Christ in Philippi.

1. REFLECT GOD'S GRACE (PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13)

Verse 12: *So then, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now even more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*

In light of Christ's superlative example of selfless service, Paul exhorted the Philippian believers to demonstrate their salvation in their daily lives. The Greek word rendered "so then" connects Paul's admonition with the preceding presentation of Christ as Christians' Model of the mind-set or attitude they were to have. The phrase "my dear friends" literally is "my beloved ones." It expressed Paul's warm af-

fection for the Philippian Christians.

Obedience was an essential element in Christ's mind-set (2:8), and Paul acknowledged that his friends had obeyed God's message through him. They had always obeyed by accepting the gospel and living by its demands.

If the phrase "not only" links grammatically to "obeyed," then the meaning is that Paul wanted his friends to continue their obedience to God even though he wasn't present with them. If the phrase links to "work out," the emphasis is that Paul urged them to go on demonstrating their salvation in their daily lives even more in his absence.

The Philippian Christians were to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. The Greek term rendered "work out" means "practice." It can have the sense of completing or finishing something. Believers can't work to gain or retain salvation. Rather, they're to give evidence of their salvation in their daily living. The phrase "your own" probably refers to each individual's experience of redemption. If individual church members are putting their redemption into practice and thus moving it toward fulfillment, the church as a whole will be doing so.

The phrase "with fear and trembling" conveys the idea of a reverent caution that doesn't rely on self but realizes the need for God's help. The attitude of fear and trembling is the polar opposite of arrogance and pride.

Verse 13: *For it is God who is working in you, enabling you both to desire and to work out His good purpose.*

Paul reminded his friends that they weren't left to their own inadequate resources in demonstrating their salvation. God was present to work in each of them and in the church collectively to motivate them and to enable them to work out. The Greek term translated "working" and "to work out" gives us our word "energize" and has the sense of efficient energy or power. God in believers enabled them to work effectively on behalf of His redemptive purpose. God's purpose is that people experience salvation from sin and grow toward spiritual maturity. As the Philippian Christians lived out their salvation, God continually worked in them to ignite the determination to further His redemptive purpose and to enable them to follow through.

2. REFLECT GOD'S JOY (PHILIPPIANS 2:14-18)

Verse 14: *Do everything without grumbling and arguing,*

Having Christ's mind-set and demonstrating it in the church's fellowship would preclude grumbling and arguing.

The Greek word translated "arguing" can have the sense of questioning or doubting. One approach is to see grumbling as private complaints and arguing as public disputes. Both terms indicated self-assertiveness, which was the opposite attitude of self-giving that Christ modeled.

Verse 15: *so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverted generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world.*

Dispensing with "grumbling and arguing" would enable the Philippian Christians to show themselves blameless, pure, and faultless. Paul piled up terms to emphasize the character believers were to have as children of God — members of His family by grace through faith.

The Philippian Christians lived in a crooked and perverted generation. The word "generation" referred to the believers' hostile, pagan environment. In the spiritual darkness of a sphere ruled by evil (the world), they shone like stars. The light they gave came from Christ within them, the radiance of grace and love that could dispel the darkness of sin and ignorance.

Verse 16: *Hold firmly to the message of life. Then I can boast in the day of Christ that I didn't run or labor for nothing.*

Paul urged his friends to hold firmly to the message of life — the gospel of Christ. The Greek term rendered "hold firmly" is in the present tense, meaning "to go on holding." The verb can mean "to hold fast to" or "to hold out (something)" — in the sense of displaying or presenting. Paul may have intended both shades of meaning: Believers were to be faithful to gospel truths and were to demonstrate the good news in their living.

If Paul's friends held to and displayed the truths of the gospel, when Christ returned the apostle would have grounds for glorying. The Philippians would offer evidence that his ministry had been effective and had yielded positive results. He wouldn't be disqualified as a runner in a race, and the results of his labor wouldn't be rejected as worthless.

Verse 17: *But even if I am poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.*

Tactfully, Paul presented his attitude as modeled on Christ's mind-set of selfless service. He used an image from the Jewish sacrificial system. A drink offering, usually a cup of wine, was poured out on the altar in connection with the sacrifice. Evidently Paul considered the Philippian believers' faith (or faithfulness) to be their sacrifice and service offered

to God. Paul was willing to pour out his life to God on the Philippian Christians' behalf as an act of worship. He willingly and gladly would give himself for others, following Christ's model of self-sacrifice.

Verse 18: *In the same way you should also be glad and rejoice with me.*

Four times in verses 17b-18, Paul used forms of the Greek term that means "rejoice" or "rejoice with." He didn't mean he was happy with his circumstances and thus his friends should be happy. Rather, they were to share his solid confidence that no matter what happened, he and they were held securely in God's grace.

3. REFLECT GOD'S LOVE (PHILIPPIANS 2:19-24)

Verse 19: *Now I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon so that I also may be encouraged when I hear news about you.*

Paul offered Timothy, his younger coworker, as a second example of Christ's mind-set. The apostle felt confident he would be able to send Timothy to Philippi soon. Paul wanted to receive accurate, detailed news about the believers' circumstances and welfare. Also, Timothy would offer needed encouragement and guidance. Knowing the believers were remaining faithful to Christ and were united would encourage Paul. The Greek word translated "encouraged" carries the sense comfort and cheer; a good report from Timothy would lift Paul's spirits.

Verse 20: *For I have no one else like-minded who will genuinely care about your interests;*

Paul couldn't go to the Philippian believers, but he would send the best substitute available: Timothy. No one else was like-minded (literally, "equal-souled") with Paul. The apostle could've meant that of all his coworkers, Timothy most closely matched Paul's servant attitude or spirit. More likely, however, Paul meant that of all the people around him, Timothy shared most deeply Paul's love and concern for the Philippian Christians.

Verse 21: *all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.*

In 1:14-16, Paul had mentioned courageous believers in Rome who preached the gospel with love, the right motive. One interpretation is that Paul's statement was a sad reflection on the self-seeking of people in general. Thus Timothy was a rare person who could be entrusted with — and who would accept — the important mission of representing Paul

to the Philippian believers. Timothy's interests were the interests of Jesus Christ — the welfare of His people.

Verse 22: *But you know his proven character, because he has served with me in the gospel ministry like a son with a father.*

The Philippian Christians had observed Timothy in action during the missionary party's stay in Philippi (Acts 16). They had firsthand knowledge of his proven character. That is, he had been tested and found to be genuine. Paul's friends knew that Timothy had served with Paul in his missionary endeavors. In 2:7, Paul pointed out that Christ chose to be a servant; Timothy was following his Lord's example. Paul viewed Timothy as his spiritual son, whom the apostle mentored in the gospel ministry — the work of spreading the gospel.

Verse 23: *Therefore, I hope to send him as soon as I see how things go with me.*

Paul was awaiting trial before the emperor. When the verdict was in, he would send Timothy to Philippi. If Paul were found guilty, Timothy would represent him ably.

Verse 24: *I am convinced in the Lord that I myself will also come quickly.*

Yet Paul was convinced in the Lord that he would be acquitted. When that happened, he quickly would arrange to visit the church.

4. REFLECT GOD'S SACRIFICE (PHILIPPIANS 2:25-30)

Verse 25: *But I considered it necessary to send you Epaphroditus—my brother, coworker, and fellow soldier, as well as your messenger and minister to my need—*

Paul presented Epaphroditus [ih PAF roh DIGH tuhs] as a third example of Christ's mind-set. The Philippian Christians had sent him to Rome with a gift for Paul. Epaphroditus was to stay with Paul and to serve him. However, Paul was sending this helper back to the church ahead of schedule and thus explained the reason he considered doing so was necessary.

Paul described Epaphroditus in glowing terms. The emissary was Paul's brother in Christ, a valued and loved fellow member of God's family of grace. Epaphroditus was Paul's coworker; they were working together in Christ's cause. He also was Paul's fellow soldier, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the apostle in the cosmic battle against evil (Ephesians 6:12). By referring to Epaphroditus as the Philippian Christians' messenger and minister to Paul's need, the apostle reminded them that Epaphroditus had accepted a difficult assignment. He had made the long, hard journey

to Rome and had shared the stigma of Paul's confinement.

Verse 26: *since he has been longing for all of you and was distressed because you heard that he was sick.*

Word got back to Paul and Epaphroditus that the church was concerned about their representative's health. Epaphroditus was distressed on learning that his fellow Christians knew of his illness. In addition, he was homesick and yearned to see them.

Verse 27: *Indeed, he was so sick that he nearly died. However, God had mercy on him, and not only on him but also on me, so that I would not have one grief on top of another.*

Paul acknowledged that Epaphroditus indeed had been ill — so sick that he nearly died. Paul's language is picturesque. Literally, he wrote that Epaphroditus had been "next door to death."

Paul attributed Epaphroditus's recovery to God's merciful intervention. God had mercy on Epaphroditus and healed him. By doing so, God had mercy on Paul in the sense that Epaphroditus's death wasn't one more grief piled on top of all the others.

Verse 28: *For this reason, I am very eager to send him so that you may rejoice when you see him again and I may be less anxious.*

Because Epaphroditus had been gravely ill and the Philippian believers had learned about his condition, Paul wanted to send him home as quickly as possible. On Epaphroditus's return, they could see for themselves that he had recovered. His evident health would lead to believers' concern being replaced with rejoicing.

Verse 29: *Therefore, welcome him in the Lord with all joy and hold men like him in honor,*

Paul urged his readers to joyfully welcome Epaphroditus on his return home. They were to hold men of such courage and faithfulness in honor. Rather than view Epaphroditus as a failure who shirked his duty, they were to affirm him for fulfilling his assignment.

Verse 30: *because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up what was lacking in your ministry to me.*

Paul emphasized that Epaphroditus's work for Christ had brought him to the point of death. The Greek word translated "risked" was a gambling term that carried the idea of boldly exposing oneself to danger. Epaphroditus put himself at risk to make up what was lacking in the Philippian believers' ministry to Paul.