Eager Expectations
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The Story of God Bible Commentary

PHILIPPIANS

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Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. 20 I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

With unsurpassed confidence, Paul declares that his fate is secure—he is in Christ. Thus life and death hold importance only as they shape his relationship with Christ. In this passage, he will trace out the two paths: one of continued ministry, the other death. In either case, he is sustained by Christ. He concludes that he will remain in ministry and even gain his freedom so that he can visit the Philippians once more.

Paul Rejoices (1:18b)
Paul continues to rejoice because the gospel goes forward. The gospel framework controls his entire vision of his work, his life, and his (eventual) death. To the Galatians Paul declares that he has been crucified with Christ; he no longer lives, but Christ lives in him (Gal 2:19–20). To the Romans Paul
declares that believers are buried with Christ in their baptism, and they are raised up to walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4). To the Corinthians, Paul declares that anyone in Christ is a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). Those words form Paul to his core, so he can thus declare to the Philippians that his life and his death are taken up in the promises of new life in Christ.

Paul’s Deliverance through Prayer and the Holy Spirit (1:19)

Paul now discusses his views on his imprisonment. He reassures the Philippians that even in such dire straits as he now finds himself, he believes God will work for Paul’s deliverance and the furtherance of the gospel. These two convictions are possible because of their prayers for Paul and the provision of the Holy Spirit. Paul rests on the sure hope that he will be bold to the end, whatever that end might be.

Paul speaks of his “deliverance” by using the word ἱλορία, often translated as “salvation.” Paul is likely speaking theologically here, claiming that God will vindicate his obedience and will further his plan even in the midst of what seems like a hopelessly failed situation — the apostle’s imprisonment. Paul’s use of ἱλορία suggests he will get out of prison alive or be delivered from the Roman court system. However, it is wrong to think that Paul believes he will secure his eternal salvation by his faithfulness or potential martyrdom. Nowhere does the apostle indicate that we earn our salvation. Our obedience flows from our right standing before God; it does not create our right standing.

The key to understanding this verse correctly is to see salvation as broader than only the moment one “gets saved.” G. B. Caird explains that the New Testament indicates “salvation is a threefold act of God: an accomplished fact, an experience continuing in the present, and a consummation still to come.”1 Caird continues, “The simplest way is to see the three tenses [past, present, future] as states in a process begun, continued, and ended.”2 Such progress occurs in the individual, as in Philippians 1:6, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus,” and in the spreading of Christ’s influence throughout the world and in the church (see Eph 4:13). Paul stresses that we are saved from the guilt of our sins and the final judgment, and are saved to a life freed from enslavement to sin, a life that will be consummated with a new, glorified body in the day of Christ (1 Cor 15:35–57).

Paul’s imprisonment is another opportunity for God’s grace to shine in his

2. Ibid., 122.
own heart and into a dark, blind world. His imprisonment and his potential freedom (either in life or by death) both serve as further evidence of God’s redemptive plan working in Paul’s life, and through Paul to the church and the world (see also Rom 8:28). For Paul, good is the only outcome, since God is at work; he has planned it that all who love him will be changed and be conformed to the image of the Son, Jesus Christ.

Paul’s firm convictions about his salvation or deliverance are rooted in two things: the Philippians’ prayers and the Holy Spirit. Paul does not tell us how their prayers are effective, nor does he indicate that had they not prayed, he would be in despair. Rather, Paul confirms the close ties he shares with them that with their prayers they show their commitment to the gospel and to Paul’s ministry. In other words, Paul does not see himself as a “lone ranger”; rather, he embraces the help of his teammates, the Philippians, whose prayers make a difference.

Moreover, throughout his letters Paul mentions coworkers and fellow prisoners who have supported him and encouraged him. For example, Aristarchus, Mark (the cousin of Barnabas), and Justus are the “only Jews among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort for me” (Col 4:10–11). He also speaks of Tychicus, Onesimus, and Luke (4:7, 9, 14). Romans 16 is filled with names of Paul’s friends and coworkers, both Jewish and Gentile believers. In 1 Corinthians 16:15–18 he refers to Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus who brought news and encouragement from Corinth.

As Paul writes to the Philippians, perhaps in the back of his mind he recalls all these people and has in view the body of Christ with its different gifts. Paul writes to the Romans that some in the body have gifts of encouragement, some of service, some of generosity (Rom 12:6–8). Certainly the Philippians have demonstrated those gifts on behalf of Paul by sending Epaphroditus to minister to him, sending money to help him, and remembering him in prayer.

Paul also indicates that he has been provided the Holy Spirit (1:19). The phrase “provision of the Spirit” can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, “of the Spirit” can be interpreted as the subject who is doing the providing. Thus we would say that the Holy Spirit provides Paul’s needs. On the other hand, the Spirit can be the object; Paul has been given the Holy Spirit as provided by God. The second option is preferable, because it follows Paul’s use in Galatians 3:5 and retains the natural meaning of the noun (“provision”).

Paul is not implying either here or in Galatians that the Holy Spirit comes and goes in a believer’s life. Paul is firm in his insistence that a follower of Christ is sealed with the Spirit (Eph 1:13–14) and has received the Spirit of adoption (Rom 8:15–17). But Paul does indicate that the Spirit can be more
or less active in a person’s life. To the Romans he declares that the Spirit prays and intercedes for us when we run out of words (8:26). Paul encourages the Galatians to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25).

Paul adds another phrase to “Spirit”: “of Jesus Christ.” We face a similar interpretative dilemma—does Paul mean that Christ (subject) sends the Spirit? Or that the Spirit represents Jesus Christ in Paul’s life? Once again we look to Romans 8. In 8:9–10, Paul speaks about both the Spirit of Christ and of Christ being in a believer. In 2 Corinthians 3:17, Paul explains that “the Lord [Christ] is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” The Holy Spirit is the “agent for manifesting Christ”;3 the Spirit is “the powerful presence of the risen and exalted Messiah.”4 Note that Paul ties together tightly the Philippians’ prayers and the Spirit’s presence with him in prison. It is through the one Spirit that the church experiences unity, as Paul declares to the Ephesians, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:4–6; see also 1 Cor 12:4).

Courage Sufficient unto the Task (1:20)

In 1:20, Paul speaks directly to an underlying concern of the Philippians, namely, his possible death. His statement matches his request in Ephesians 6:19–20 that the Ephesians pray that Paul will be bold and confident in his faith—to the end. Neither he nor the Philippians are under any illusions that possible torture and hideous death might await him. So how can Paul have any hope? Paul uses an interesting term along with hope, translated in the NIV as “eagerly expect.” This term has the idea of watching something intently (see Rom 8:19). The picture Paul creates here is one of determined focus and firm conviction. Paul’s hope is not wishful thinking but is based on the sure reality of Christ’s glorification and honor.

What is Paul expecting and hoping? That, in the final hour, he will not fail in his testimony. Paul does not want to “be ashamed,” to experience the public humiliation that would come with a denial of his faith. When we today hear the term “shame,” we think of someone who feels bad for a wrong they did. But in Paul’s day, to be ashamed was to be publicly humiliated. Thus when Hebrews declares that Jesus Christ ignored the shame of the cross (12:1–2), or when Paul announces that he is not ashamed of the gospel (Rom 1:16), the message is that the social stigma of the cross should not deter believers in their public testimony, any more than it deterred Christ from dying on

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a cross. Note Paul’s own imitation of Christ’s meekness in accepting public humiliation for the sake of the gospel.

**Martyrdom (1:20–21)**
His final phrase of 1:20 ("whether through life or through death") signals the possibility of martyrdom. Paul’s martyrdom is not the focus of his letter, nor does he argue that such a death will bring him closer to Christ. Because this topic is germane to our interpretation of other passages in the letter (2:17; 3:10), it is important that we establish Paul’s position on martyrdom here. First, Paul states clearly that he expects to visit the Philippians (1:25; 2:24); this firm conviction should carry its full weight in interpreting Paul’s general comments about death. Second, he regards his struggles and the Philippians’ struggles as the “same” (1:30), or closely related (2:17), and there is no evidence that Paul expects the Philippians to be martyred. Third, Paul’s image of being a “drink offering” (2:17) is not a metaphor for his martyrdom (see comments). Fourth, Paul’s “gain” is not in the type of his death, namely martyrdom, but that at his death, he is joined more fully to Christ.

To assume that Paul elevates the martyr’s death as superior reads the ideals of the later church back onto Paul. Paul wants to be obedient unto death, whatever that death might be. A martyr does not choose to die in this manner; rather, a martyr accepts his or her type of death as God’s choice for them. If martyrdom were the best way to know Christ, Paul would have explicitly encouraged it. Instead, what Paul does encourage, loudly and clearly, is preaching boldly the gospel of Christ. Beyond that, who can say how God will glorify himself in a believer’s final seconds? Paul dies daily (1 Cor 15:31), as he suffers on behalf of the gospel.

**Paul’s Fruitful Ministry (1:21–26)**
In the next few verses Paul explains his view of his ministry and his view of a believer’s death. He openly processes his train of thought to the Philippians, including his desire to depart this life to be with Christ. He recognizes that his ministry bears fruit (1:22), but then he steps back and looks at the two ideas: “life with Christ” and “death to be fully with Christ.” There is hardly a pause as Paul exclaims the great glory awaiting believers in the Lord (1:23). But after this spontaneous high note of joy, Paul returns to the matter at hand, namely, his own situation and the concern it raises among the Philippians (1:24–26).

Throughout this passage, Paul uses “I” extensively, which speaks to his intimate relationship with the Philippians. However, he also speaks as a representative believer, for every Christian can say that death is gain, for our hope of salvation is sure. Paul uses the representative “I” in 1 Corinthians 13:1–13,
as he similarly includes all believers: “If I speak in human or angelic tongues, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”

**To Live Is Christ (1:21)**

In 1:21, Paul announces: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” The Greek sentence has no verbs, so in English we supply the verb “to be.” Additionally, Christ is mentioned by name only in the first clause. Calvin and Luther (among others) read the verse, “To me Christ is gain in life and in death.” Here Christ, not Paul, is the subject. Rendering the statement this way certainly matches the sentiment that infuses Paul’s letters and is behind his declaration that all things are now as rubbish compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ (3:8). While the meaning of this translation is solidly Pauline (Gal 2:20; Col 3:4), it may not fully represent Paul’s specific meaning in this context. Paul will go on in the next few verses to contrast the two possibilities, life in ministry and death, that join him fully to Christ. The Reformers’ translation dulls the distinction between the gain in death and the necessity of Paul’s continued ministry.

The enigmatic phrase “to live is Christ” is further explained in 1:22 as life in a human body (lit., “the flesh”) and life that produces fruit. Paul’s grammar is ambiguous; at issue is the relationship between the first two clauses such that the sentence can read either (A) “but if living in the flesh — (if) this is fruit of toil to me, then what I shall choose I do not declare,” or (B) “but if living in the flesh (is my lot), this is fruit of toil for me, and what I shall choose I do not declare.” In the former case, Paul is declaring that while his own preference is to die and be with Christ, he cannot allow that personal gain to outweigh God’s fruitful work in his ministry. In the second case, Paul is acknowledging that as long as he is in the flesh, God will work in and through him.

Option A follows the Greek more closely and offers a better approach to understanding Paul’s final clause in the verse: “Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!” God is working in Paul. He describes what living in the flesh is — namely, a life lived in total surrender to God who works in and through his people (see also 1:6; 2:13). In other words, option A is clearer in its emphasis

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7. Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 118–20. He notes that this position does not take full account of the Greek grammar, which includes a nominative article (“the”) before “live” and “die.”
that life in the flesh is synonymous with fruitful ministry. It is not that it will (or might) result in fruitful work, but that our life in Christ is God’s good works working through and in us for the world. This is a word to all believers: labor is not limited to the apostles, pastors, or missionaries; fruitful labor is the birthright and responsibility of all those born anew in Christ.

Paul ends this thought with “I do not know!” Since the immediate context suggests Paul is happy to make everything known to the Philippians, this phrase intimates that Paul cannot say what he would do if he really had the choice between remaining in his ministry or departing to be with Christ. Either the choice has not been made known to him by God, or he cannot make it based solely on his (limited) human reasoning. Underneath Paul’s words is his conviction that his personal choice is not the ultimate criterion in determining his future; rather, God is.

**To Depart and Be with Christ (1:23–24)**

In 1:23 Paul continues his train of thought, but now speaks more generally not only of his possible imminent death (which would be his gain), but the reality of any believer who both embraces God’s work in their life as well as longs for the peace and rest received upon death. Paul is “torn” between the two options. The verb Paul uses creates the word picture of a road built between two walls that constrain the traveler. It carries strong emotional force. In other words, Paul is not describing choosing between chocolate and vanilla ice cream, but between the all-surpassing gain that each believer longs for in death, and the blessed reality of a fruitful ministry that also includes suffering for Christ.

Although he continues rhetorically as though he is dealing with the quandary posed in the previous verse, he is not in fact contemplating an actual situation wherein he gets to decide. Instead, he takes the opportunity to express theologically why any believer, when thinking only of a personal, individual relationship with God in Christ, desires to depart this life to enjoy God fully. The surpassing greatness of life with Christ unhindered by our flesh should excite all believers. Paul’s language is clear in affirming death as a blessing for believers, but what is less clear is how Paul pictures what happens at death. Because he is not addressing this question in 1:23, we will explore the debates concerning Paul’s view on life after death in the “Live the Story” section, orienting the reader in the wider discussion of this issue.

Paul’s declaration that “to die is gain” must not be interpreted as denigrating our life in this world. Paul does not seek to escape the world. He speaks over and over that he is joyful because of the Lord’s work. He joyfully and willingly embraces suffering as confirmation of God’s activity in building his
church and reaching out to the world. He declares that God's grace is magnified as he faces his afflictions (2 Cor 12:9–10).

Paul’s hope is that this world will be made new when Christ returns. Christ’s bodily resurrection stands as our own promise of resurrected life in the new heavens and new earth. Paul teaches that salvation includes becoming a member of Christ’s body. No believer lives only unto himself or herself. So along with his exuberant outburst that to be with Christ is far and away the better option, he also knows that he is part of a community and is God’s servant. Those realities in the end persuade Paul that he will gain his freedom from his Roman chains, so that he can continue his work among them (1:24–26).

**Paul’s Continuing Ministry (1:24–26)**

Paul thus contrasts the personal “better” with the “necessity” or service-minded attitude characteristic of Jesus himself. How does he make this determination? Paul clearly wants to hang onto both realities—the importance of ministry for Christ and the ultimate reward of life forever with Christ. But over both of these truths stands Paul’s ultimate conviction: that the gospel will go forward. To express these three beliefs, he notes several points: (1) his ministry is fruitful (God’s work in and through Paul), (1:22); (2) his ultimate goal is the resurrected life with Christ (1:23); (3) the work of the gospel means that he will remain “in the flesh” for the continued progress and joy of the Philippians. Paul’s argument as described, then, does not suggest Paul is vacillating. Moreover, this reading supports the basic fact that Paul is still alive, imprisoned by the Praetorian guard. In that real sense, he remains their apostle.

At bottom, Paul’s so-called “dilemma” related to choice is imaginary, for God has called him into service. We might say today, this is a “win-win” situation for Paul, for “in Christ” he cannot lose. In these words the apostle carves out a path that we can follow, taking care to avoid sliding into complete immersion with the cares and triumphs of this world, or slipping into total disregard for the world’s plight only to gaze with an unholy stubbornness toward heaven. Paul’s hope of resurrection and the new heavens and earth do not distract him from his daily activities; rather, the vision energizes these duties and invests them with eternal significance. In short, Paul is willing to wait on God’s timing in receiving his summons to depart and be with Christ.

**Progress and Joy in the Faith (1:25)**

Verses 25–26 offer further explanation of Paul’s plans. He will assist the Philippians in their “progress” in the Lord; additionally, he will return to them
and bring great boasting in God’s goodness and power in Christ. He begins with the strong statement that he is “convinced” that he will remain in his ministry and come to visit them. He uses the same verb in 2:24 as he reiterates that he is “confident” in the Lord that he will visit the Philippians soon. Paul will not die in Rome now.

With this emphasis on an upcoming visit to “all of you,” Paul is beginning to shift away from a discussion of his own circumstances to look closely at the Philippians’ situation. He will insist on their unity in the remaining chapters, and here he offers a foretaste of this—and not only unity, but also their deepening walk with God and their growing joy in the Lord. These three convictions will permeate the remaining three chapters.

Thus 1:25–26 turns to look ahead in the letter. Yet these verses also serve to complete Paul’s argument that began in 1:12, where he spoke of the “advance” or progress of the gospel, and here he speaks of the Philippians’ “progress,” repeating the same verb. In 1:12 the advancement is both the gospel being made known to many and the emboldening of believers in testifying to that message. The same meaning can be understood in 1:25, that the Philippians will boldly preach the gospel and live a life that matches the message they proclaim.

Thus, Paul defines “progress” relative to God’s call on every believer’s life to be obedient. In this Paul’s message differs from the philosophers of the day, who stressed progress as working hard. Such people could boast in their own efforts. But Paul makes clear that believers’ progress is grounded solely in God’s work in and through them (cf. 2:13). Moreover, Paul’s definition of progress frees believers from having to judge their own ministry’s effectiveness. If it is God who gives the growth (1 Cor 3:6), then our progress is not based on the size or influence of our ministry. Indeed, Paul cautions the Corinthians not to judge his ministry by such standards, and Paul insists he does not do so either (4:2–5).

Not only does Paul have progress in view, but also he stresses that his remaining with them is for their “joy.” This resounding note of joy chimes throughout this letter, for Paul knows the secret to a healthy spiritual life: joy. It is joy that allows one to have confident hope that all will be made right in the end through God’s work in Christ (1 Cor 15:24–28). It is deep joy in the Lord that grows contentment, thus muting the siren calls to pursue passions, prestige, wealth, and fame. It is joy in the Lord that guards the heart from utter despair.

Paul qualifies their progress and joy as being “in the faith.” “Faith” can mean the content of the gospel, that which is believed, or it can mean their personal faith, their trust in Christ (3:9). These ideas are not mutually
exclusive. But since in 1:12 progress was related to the spread of the gospel’s message, and since 1:27 also stresses the content of faith, on the whole, it seems more likely that Paul’s point here is that the Philippians will progress in their understanding of the faith, and that their joy will be more solidly rooted in the truth of the gospel.

Boasting in Christ Jesus (1:26)
Finally, Paul believes they will “boast in Christ,” as they see how Christ worked in their prayers and concern for Paul and in Paul himself, such that he was delivered from Rome and now is present with them. To our ears, “boasting” carries pejorative connotations because it is generally self-referential. But in the Bible, boasting reflects the issue of confidence. Does one have confidence in the Lord? Then one may boast in the Lord. Jeremiah 9:23–24 highlights types of boasting: one can boast in human effort or in the power of God. Paul distinguishes the two in Philippians 3:3–4, as he contrasts boasting in circumcision or boasting in Christ.

We might not use the phrase “boasting in the Lord” today, but when we say, “praise the Lord,” we acknowledge publicly what God’s power has done. In a sense, we are boasting as we praise, because we recognize God’s work and remind ourselves it is not by our own strength that good is accomplished. The Philippians, Paul believes, will have the opportunity to glorify God as he answers their prayers (1:19). This too will be a cause for rejoicing.

Paul declares to the Philippians that he is convinced that his situation (imprisonment) “will turn out for my deliverance” (1:19). These words mirror Job’s declaration that “though he slay me, yet will I praise him; I will surely defend my ways to his face. Indeed, this will turn out for my deliverance [salvation]” (Job 13:15–16, italics added). Although Paul does not identify in his letter that he is quoting from Job, the words he uses are exactly the same in the Septuagint’s rendering. Perhaps this verse circulated on its own within Judaism as a testimony to God’s goodness in the face of potential martyrdom, much as God vindicated Job. Or perhaps Paul was thinking of the verse before, that though he may die, yet his dying breath will be one of praise to God. In either case, Paul’s allusion invites us to look at Job and even more, God’s response.

Job’s Suffering
Suffering is one of the hardest issues for humans to understand and explain. Sometimes it is clear why one suffers—if I eat an entire pint of ice cream,
I will suffer pains in my stomach. If I fail to pay my electric bill, I will suffer darkness when the sun goes down. But suffering that seems arbitrary (an infant’s cancer) or out of proportion (thousands dead from an earthquake or tsunami) raise questions about God’s presence (or absence) and power. Paul invites believers to see suffering differently, that is, through Christ’s grace. In this, he is following the book of Job’s lead, as Job is directed by God not to ask for justice based on his righteousness, but humbly to seek wisdom, for God asks for a posture of faith.

In Job, two complaints are leveled at God: (1) the righteous do righteous deeds because they know that God will reward them, and (2) the righteous should not suffer, as suffering is punishment for sins. The first charge is leveled by the Adversary in 1:9–12; 2:4–6, and the first half of the book contains Job’s correct refutation of that charge (e.g., Job 27). Job has lost everything, but he maintains his righteousness. But the second charge is challenged by God as too limited in scope and based on a false premise. It is too limited because it fails to appreciate God’s unimaginably great wisdom. It is false in that it supposes that bad things happen to bad people, and thus good things must happen to good people.

Instead, God shows Job that suffering is part of the fabric of a creation that is not in its final form, for disorder still exists. God does not address suffering; instead, he addresses Job’s assumptions about his situation and his claims of righteousness. God chooses not to explain suffering; instead, he shows himself to Job and asks Job to trust him. This trust is not based on the assumption that at some point suffering will make sense, for that is merely assuming a deeper justice by which God operates. It is not in the end justice, but wisdom, that God identifies as the explanation for how the world operates. Faced with God’s wisdom, Job repents and worships.9

Christ, the Cross, and the Wisdom of God

Paul teaches that Christ is God’s wisdom and power (1 Cor 1:24, 30), and God’s wisdom is revealed in Christ’s cross. Even more, Paul declares that believers “have the mind of Christ” (2:16) through the Holy Spirit, so that we can discern what is God’s truth and reject the world’s wisdom. Paul speaks of Christ’s suffering similarly. He explains that suffering first by connecting sin to death (Rom 5:1–19; 1 Cor 15:20–28, 56–57) and then highlighting how Christ’s death enters into our sin and death. As Hafemann explains, “Paul could thus interpret his suffering in terms of the cross of Christ, while his ability to endure it or God’s action of deliverance from it, were an expression

9. I’m indebted to John Walton, my colleague at Wheaton College, for these insights. See John Walton, Job (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).
of the same divine power revealed in Christ’s resurrection.” A similar call for believers to accept suffering with joy points to their testimony that God’s wisdom is seen in the cross, and God’s power is sufficient for any situation.

Paul sees even more clearly than did Job that suffering (illness, natural disaster, broken relationships, war) signals the disorder of this present age. But that is not the last word. Christ has been raised, and we now know that the end is closer than when we first believed (Rom 13:11). The deliverance that Job experienced was more than he could have imagined. He was freed from his small view of God and an inflated view of his own righteousness. He learned that God does not inflict suffering as payback for sin, nor is God required to bless the righteous. God’s wisdom dictates his actions, and his character, while not arbitrary, is not completely comprehensible to the human mind.

**Death Is Gain, Life Is Christ**

For Paul, death is gain, and life is Christ. I’ve reversed the order of these biblical phrases because I think often believers today think about Paul’s statement in this reverse order. We are prepared (at least we think we are) to die, because we rightly trust in Christ’s righteousness and intercession on our behalf. But we do not have a real sense of what it means to live for Christ, as we have thought of Christianity basically as our “get out of jail free” card, our ticket to heaven. We might say that we live for Christ, but what we mean is that we live for Christ and for work, family, ministry, wealth, and so on. How can we get to Paul’s place of living for Christ period?

It is not as though Paul did not have a ministry or friends. He knew what his ministry or call was—to preach Christ and not to baptize, for example (1 Cor 1:10–17). He submitted to God’s teaching—he learned to be content (Phil 4:10–13), and he discovered that God’s grace is sufficient (2 Cor 12:7–10). He actively critiqued the wider world’s social and cultural definitions of success (Phil 3:4–14). He devoted himself to love (1 Cor 13) and never forgot that this present age is passing away.

Sometimes God reminds us of these truths in direct ways. In the mid-1990s, my husband, Jim, was drawn to join a new ministry that involved building and managing a pediatric rehabilitation hospital in Kenya. I had just completed my PhD and was eager to start looking for full-time work. During those long years of dissertation writing, I promised God that this degree was his to do with as he pleased. After much prayer, it was clear to both Jim and me that God was calling us to Kenya. However, I had no teaching job lined

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up—in fact, no job at all. I realized then that when I thought I was giving
my degree to God, what I was really saying was that I’d take (just about) any
teaching job. I never expected that God might decide to closet the degree
altogether. As it turned out, I did have teaching opportunities in Nairobi, but
these emerged after we arrived in Kenya. It was an important lesson for me,
challenging me as to whether God really has providential and wise authority
over my life, work, and family.

Christ Will Be Exalted in My Body
Not only is Paul convinced “for me to live is Christ,” but he also is confident
that Christ will be exalted in his body. Lest we imagine that living for Christ
in Paul’s mind means grudgingly obeying or doing just enough to past mus-
ter, Paul declares that he desires Christ to be exalted in his body, in his life.
What does that look like? Paul stresses that he is bold in proclaiming the
gospel. Thus one important way to exalt Christ is to be bold in our convic-
tion that the gospel is the truth. Such boldness can take many forms, but they
all express the gospel truth in a loving manner. Some are bold at work when
they refuse to gossip and instead speak words of healing and grace. Others are
bold in their neighborhoods, looking for ways to extend God’s blessings in
practical, spontaneous ways. Some are bold as they obey God’s call to engage
in ministries that stretch them. Others are bold as they obey God’s Word to
wait patiently in their current situation. Exalting Christ in our lives happens
as we boldly obey.

Paul exalts Christ as he focuses on the goal, the prize of life with Christ in
his resurrected state. Exalting Christ means looking forward, driving onward,
advancing with purpose, having an eschatological frame of reference. Like a
hound with his nose on the scent, Paul runs with a dedicated goal and singular
purpose. Paul never loses sight of the reality that Christ will return, that the
dead will be raised, and those whose names are written in the book of life (Phil
4:3) will enjoy God’s company forever. That picture never slips from his mind.

No Case Made by Paul for His Martyrdom
I noted above that Paul is not presenting a case for his impending martyrdom.
I now would like to examine why the topic is more than academic. It is not
so much that Paul’s martyrdom in general is problematic. Church tradition
teaches that Paul was beheaded under Nero, and there is no reason to doubt
this. Rather, the problem with interpreting Philippians as Paul’s statements
about his martyrdom is that the position can be articulated in such a way as
to elevate martyrs above “ordinary” believers. The second- and third-century
church fell at times to this temptation. A martyr should not boast in his or her
martyrdom, for it was God who called them to this death. It is God’s decision not to call other believers to such a death. In both cases, the believer is judged on their faithfulness, not on the manner in which they died.

The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity

One of the most well-known martyrs in the early church is Perpetua, who was killed in AD 203 in Carthage, North Africa.11 The account of her martyrdom is drawn in large part from her personal writings from prison shortly before her death, making this work one of the earliest Christian testimonies written by a woman.12 At her arrest, her father (a non-Christian) begs her to recant, to which she boldly responds, “Father, said I, do you see … this vessel lying here to be a little pitcher or something else? … Can it be called by any other name than what it is? … Neither can I call myself anything else than that which I am, a Christian” (Passion 1.2).

As the day of her death approaches, she describes visions or dreams that encourage her to hold fast to her faith. The day before her death, she has a vision of herself facing wild beasts in the amphitheater, and she realizes her fate is sealed. Yet the vision continues in a most remarkable way. She sees herself becoming a man, facing down a large Egyptian gladiator. Another figure dominates the ring, a person of great height wearing a purple robe. The fight commences, and Perpetua struck the gladiator’s face with her feet and trod upon his head. At this, the purple-robed figure awarded her the victory and kissed her and said, “Daughter, peace be with you” (Passion 3.2). Perpetua realizes that her vision showed she would not be fighting beasts but the devil, and that victory awaits her. As she and Felicity enter the arena, their appearance shocks the audience, for Felicity had just given birth two days earlier and Perpetua had recently weaned her young son. The other martyrs with them fall, and Perpetua is left to guide the young gladiator’s sword to her throat, for his first blow did not finish the job.

Perpetua’s reflections indicate that over the many days of her imprisonment, she grew to understand what was to be her fate and to strengthen her resolve. She mourns the fracturing of her relationship with her father, she aches for her young son, and she wonders about having strength for the final


12. See the online translation of the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity: www.newadvent.org/fathers/0324.htm; the reader should distinguish between the Passion and a later work known as the Acts of Perpetua.
battle. But throughout her last weeks, she testifies to the companionship of her fellow martyrs and to the empowering presence of God.

Later generations rightly praise her courage. Augustine comments years later that she and the slave, Felicity, modeled Christian courage and virtue: “In the power of these virtues, they turn their backs on the world’s promises and threats, and stretch out to what lies ahead (Phil 3:13). These virtues climb up to heaven by trampling on the head of the serpent, as it hisses and whispers its various suggestions.” Augustine ends this homily with this encouragement: “So we too are the fruit of their toil. . . At least we are all in attendance upon the same Lord, all following the same teacher, accompanying the same leader, joined to the same head, wending our way to the same Jerusalem, pursuing the same charity, and embracing the same unity.” Augustine rightly connects the martyrs with the entire church in their singular pursuit of Christ.

**Missionaries and the “Average” Believer — Two-Tiered Configuration?**

The two-tiered system of martyrs and “average” believers exists in the American church in a different guise today. Now we place missionaries or pastors above other believers, creating a privileged class that does the church no good. Paul felt compelled to speak the gospel (1 Cor 9:16); God had called him for this task, and he was only being obedient in carrying out that task — God gives the growth (3:6). Paul cannot boast in anything, just as the man washing dishes is obeying the call to be a cleaner of the restaurant kitchen, or the woman performing surgery on an infant’s heart is obediently using the gifts of healing given her by God.

And the missionary is no more obedient to God’s call than the housewife and stay-at-home mother. I’ve been both — I know. In each case, obedience is the operating factor. That means that missionaries cannot boast that they are doing more for the kingdom or are somehow gifted with a higher calling. Sadly, not all missionaries I have met would agree with me. Moreover, many like to exalt missionaries because as they build them up, they can rationalize that since they are not such strong Christians, God could never call them into mission work. The two-tiered system thus meets both needs — that of the missionary who wants to feel privileged, and that of the “average” believer who does not want God to call them to missions.

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This God-dishonoring dance needs to stop. It also means that the housewife has as much responsibility to live into God’s kingdom, to step outside her comfort zone and obey God as he asks her to risk for the sake of the gospel. The point is not what we do; the point is that we are doing what God asks us to do.

Life after Death
Let us return to Paul’s declaration “for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Paul expands on death’s gain a few verses later, writing of his desire to depart and be with Christ. These statements are not meant to establish doctrine about what life after death looks like, but bringing up the subject invites us to probe into the big picture as presented in Paul’s letters. Paul notes that when he departs (dies), he will be with Christ, which implies that he will be with the Lord immediately upon death (see 2 Cor 5:6–8; cf. Acts 7:59). This suggests a conscious, bodiless existence in an intermediate state before the resurrection. Paul also uses the word “sleep” when describing a believer’s death, indicating perhaps a semiconscious existence or soul sleep (1 Cor 15:51–2; 1 Thess 4:14, 16; 5:10). Paul may want to stress here as well the different sort of death believers face because their life is now hidden in Christ. They died with Christ (Gal 2:20), and they need not fear physical death; it is no more frightful than falling asleep.

The matter is made more complex because Paul also insists (rightly) on Christ’s second coming, his parousia. When that happens, those believers currently alive on earth will meet the Lord in the air and escort him down to earth (1 Thess 4:17; cf. Col 3:4). The believers receive their resurrected bodies at the end, at the final judgment (or at the millennium, depending on one’s reading of Revelation). They are then fit for life in the new heavens and new earth, a life of blessing and full fellowship with the Son.

Since the end has not yet occurred, we might assume that those who are “asleep” in Christ do not have their resurrected bodies. However, we are trapped in a linear, time-based view of the world. Could it be that the instance any believer dies, for them it is as though the end is now here? And that for believers left to mourn their passing, time continues? In the end one thing we can be sure of: “neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38). At the graveside, no one should doubt that those loved by God are safe in their Father’s arms.
Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, \(^1\) then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. \(^2\) Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, \(^4\) not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. \(^5\) In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Paul pulls out all the rhetorical stops in these few verses (2:1 – 4 is a single sentence) to galvanize the Philippians’ heart, soul, and mind toward a vision of unity within their church. He alludes to the Trinity, to their salvation in Christ, and to their membership in the community of the faithful (2:1) — all with the purpose of exciting their imagination to the surpassing joy that such unity brings. Paul pulls the rug from under the prevailing honor-based culture with his call to humility (2:3) and the active establishment of another person’s honor. \(^1\) All this is with an eye to offering a hymn to Christ, the one to whom every knee will bow.

Paul finished chapter 1 by stressing the importance of faithful suffering for Christ. He is not unaware that in the face of adversity, fear and selfishness tend to rule conduct. Thus the apostle exhorted the church to be of a single purpose and to exercise their Christian witness in the face of strong enemies. He roused them not to fear those whose end is destruction, but to embrace their suffering for Christ in hope. At the time of the Revolutionary War, Ben-

\(^1\) For a discussion of honor/shame cultures, see pp. 29 – 30.
jamin Franklin declared, “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” Paul might have resonated with this sentiment as he wrote to the Philippians. He recognized, however, that not every enemy is without; often the real dangers are power grabs, prima donnas, and prestige-seeking believers who weaken the body of Christ from within (2:3–4). It is to this potentially lethal danger that Paul turns in the beginning of chapter 2.

EXPLAIN the Story

Call to Unity (2:1–2)

Paul’s opening clauses in 2:1 are often rendered in English with “if,” perhaps suggesting that Paul is not certain of his statement. In fact, these “if” clauses are Paul’s way of getting the Philippians to recognize what they all know to be true. The NIV adds the word “therefore,” because it conveys a sense of certainty that is clearly evident in Paul’s thought. Paul wants his listeners/readers to be nodding their heads with him, agreeing with his implied questions. He wants them to be thinking deeply about each clause, allowing the truth to settle deep within.

The opening clause suggests that there is great “encouragement” in Christ. While the Greek noun (paraklēsis) can indicate exhortation, its meaning here is closer to the sense of comfort or consolation. The previous chapter ended with the profound reality that believers are called not only to Christ, but also to suffer for Christ. Both the Philippians and Paul have undergone hardship and suffering because they identified themselves as followers of Christ.

Paul expresses similar sentiments to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 1. There he connects the reality of suffering for Christ with the expansive encouragement that envelopes believers in their times of struggle (2 Cor 1:3). Here Paul declares that the God of compassion is the one who encourages both them and Paul each step of the way. Even more, Paul declares that the encouragement received from God is so abundant that one believer can pass it along to another who is going through a difficult time. The riches of God’s compassion overflow; they are powerful in believers’ testimony to God’s steadfastness in their troubles.

Comfort from His Love (2:1b)

The second clause can be understood as either focused on the “comfort” of Christ’s love or on the comfort of Love, a euphemism for God the Father.

2. The same term translated “compassion” (oiktirmos) is used in Phil 2:1 and 2 Cor 1:3.
Paul may be stressing the believers’ sure support from Christ, but I think more likely he is pointing to the all-sufficient power of the Godhead to meet both their struggles (as noted in ch. 1) and their internal divisions, as will be discussed in these verses and in 4:2–3.

One of Paul’s own experiences of this “comfort” is a near-death experience wherein he faced his mortality head-on (see 2 Cor 1:8–10). It is hard to pin down exactly what this traumatic experience was. Suggestions include facing wild beasts in Ephesus, though this is unlikely.3 Perhaps Paul faced severe opposition by human opponents, but if so, how was it different in degree than what he had experienced in Lystra (Acts 14:8–20) or the various beatings and imprisonments he mentions in 2 Corinthians 11:23–28? Some target the riot instigated by Demetrius the silversmith (see Acts 19:23–41), but Paul notes in 2 Corinthians 1:8 that this crisis occurred in Asia, not specifically in Ephesus. Moreover, Acts does not present Paul in immediate danger or miraculously rescued in that riot.

The best option, perhaps, is to understand Paul’s perilous experience as a severe illness. The theory of illness (malaria, perhaps) does justice to Paul’s implication that his near-death experience might reoccur. And recovery from a severe illness can be understood in terms of getting a new lease on life (Isa 38:16 records Hezekiah thanking God for healing him and bringing him back to life). In any case, in that desperate moment, God rescued Paul and comforted him. It is the power of God that makes secure our hope in Christ—that is the “comfort” Paul speaks of here.

Common Sharing in the Spirit (2:1c)

Paul’s third clause emphasizes the “sharing” or partnership in the Holy Spirit. Of the nineteen times that koinōnia occurs in the New Testament, thirteen are in Paul’s letters. And of those thirteen, three are in our short letter. The word carries a sense of partnership, common sharing, or ownership, as in the case of inheritance where each heir owns all of the property.4 The Holy Spirit is both the gift and the giver; the Spirit is the means of fellowship with other believers even as each believer is also in fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

Might Paul in these three clauses be reminding the Philippians of the trinitarian truth of the Godhead?5 While Paul never used the term “Trinity,” the concept itself would not be foreign to him. He declared Jesus as Lord and worshiped him. Since he was a monotheistic Jew and not a polytheist,

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3. See the arguments of Murray J. Harris, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 164–72.
5. Fee, Philippians, 179.
we must conclude that he understood God the Father and God the Son as having a relationship that both distinguished them but also recognized their essential sameness of essence. Offering another trinitarian allusion, Paul appeals to the Romans that “by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit . . . join me in my struggle by praying to God for me” (Rom 15:30). Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 13:14, Paul writes: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Here the Philippians hear of union with Christ, love from God, and a sharing in the Holy Spirit.

**Tenderness and Compassion (2:1d)**

After laying out the importance of Christ’s encouragement, love’s consolation, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Paul speaks of the affections of the heart and of mercy. He asks the Philippians if they have “any tenderness and compassion” (the latter term can be translated “mercy”). Is Paul referring to the Philippians’ attitudes toward him? Or toward each other? Or God’s tenderness and compassion directed toward his people? The answer to this set of questions is tightly tied to whether the reader understands the previous three clauses to speak primarily to the community’s concern for each other and Paul, or to God’s love and compassion directed to the church.

Support for the former theory comes from Colossians 3:12, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” Paul charges the Colossians with demonstrating a “heart of mercy.” Support for the latter understanding comes from Paul’s use of “mercy” found in his appeal to God’s “mercy” (Rom 12:1) and to “the Father of mercies” (2 Cor 1:3 ESV). The latter suggestion carries more weight, considering the overall tone of the previous clauses stressing God’s sure encouragement, compassion, and fellowship granted to believers.

**Unity Brings Paul Joy (2:2a)**

The imperative verb governing verses 2:1-4 is Paul’s call to the Philippians to “make . . . complete” his joy. This is an interesting exhortation at several levels. First, Paul assumes that his joy is an important motivator for the Philippians. Second, he speaks about joy as a marker of ministry “achievement.” Third, he encourages them to work toward unity in spirit and mind.

(1) Paul assumes that his disposition is of great importance to the Philppian church. His comment about joy reveals a bit of historical nuance to

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6. Ibid., 182.
our reconstruction of the biblical world’s understanding of teachers and their disciples. We see it with Jesus’ training of disciples. The master-teacher pours his life into the disciples, living among them, being transparent in his actions, forthcoming with his thoughts. The disciple sees the entire person from when they wake to when they turn in for the night. Such deep engagement develops the character of the disciples, shaping their perception of the world.

Paul describes himself as a nurse caring for the Thessalonians (1 Thess 3:7), or as a woman birthing the newly formed church in Galatia (Gal 4:19). He tells the Corinthians that he is their father in Christ (1 Cor 4:15). These familial images fit nicely alongside the master-teacher images in highlighting the intense closeness between the one who brings the gospel and the one who receives the gospel. Thus both Paul and the Philippians would agree that the teacher’s joy is of utmost concern to the student. A joyful apostle is one whose coworkers and churches have mastered the message and have grown to maturity. To our modern ears, it might sound like Paul is on an ego trip. This false impression is based on a failure to appreciate the scope of investment the master-teacher gives to one’s disciples.

(2) A word to pastors and lay leaders: notice Paul’s personal goal in ministry — joy. What does ministry look like if one’s goal is joy? It means, at least, that numbers don’t matter. It means that the “other” is always in view. It means that achievements have to be understood in light of the congregation’s maturing in Christ. It means that the focus of ministry, the orientation of one’s goals, actions, and purposes, is to increasingly rejoice. Nehemiah says that “the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Neh 8:10); Paul lived that reality (see below, Phil 3:1).

(3) A modern reader might be a bit perplexed that Paul values internal unity over external witness. In the American church today, I venture to say that more focus is put on outreach of some sort in the local community, on national issues, or on world missions. We put a low premium on community, or at least deep community. We all want friends, but the hard work of building community cuts into our “rights” of individual choice and self-expression. So we are happier when we have a project to serve the community or combat a social ill, and trust that such a project will create unity. But this is not the level Paul is speaking to, as we will soon see.

Paul’s call here to put the unity of the body of Christ on the local church level as of first importance cuts as well to the heart of the American value of efficiency. It takes lots of work to be united at the deep level of gospel. This is the really hard work of putting someone else’s wishes and honor above your own. It means in Paul’s world that the owner will serve the slave. It means the patron will take a lesson from her client. In the American context, it means at
the very least socioeconomic and racial/ethnic divides are openly addressed. We must practice personal inventory taking, allowing God to challenge us, especially with everyday interactions.

Paul’s emphasis on unity is not a promotion of navel gazing or self-grooming that passes for unity in some churches. But it signals to us today that all our social programs and the incredible good they do are a truncated view of what the church is. The church’s public witness must be secured by its internal vitality and strength. The church’s life force is the breath of the Spirit, the blood of Jesus, the mind of Christ, the will of the Father. That is, the church manifests the life of God in its unity of believers in Christ’s body.

Often the experience of unity occurs in the fellowship of small groups. John Stott noted the increase of the house church movement around the globe, an apparent spontaneous movement of the Holy Spirit that also was perhaps a “protest against the dehumanizing processes of secular society and the superficial formalism of much church life.” In his church’s fellowship groups, he looked for koinōnia, which included a threefold focus on reading Scripture and prayer, serving the community, and caring for each other in love.

Like-mindedness and Unity in Mind and Soul (2:2b)

Paul lists several phrases explaining what his joy looks like. He asks that they be “like-minded,” hold “the same love,” and be “one in spirit and of one mind.” Twice he uses the verb “to think” (phroneō), in the first and last of his clauses. This suggests the importance of having the same outlook on the world, on the work of God in the world, and on one’s responsibilities in light of those truths. This verb is not easy to translate because our term “think” suggests theoretical knowledge. The Greek verb, by contrast, carries the idea of wise behavior.

For example, Paul elsewhere distinguishes between the behavior of those led by their “flesh” and those led by the Spirit by stating that each group has their minds set on things that lead in one or the other direction (Rom 8:5). He cautions Gentiles not to “think” proud thoughts but to stand awestruck by God’s work grafting them onto the olive tree of salvation (11:20). The phrase “be like-minded” is also found in Romans 15:5 and 2 Corinthians 13:11, which suggests that this call to frame the community’s vision about who they are in Christ and in the world is a recurrent theme in Paul’s churches. The effort to live in harmony is so crucial that Paul repeats it twice in one verse.

Paul also asks that they “have the same love” (cf. also “love” in 2:1). His

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9. Ibid., 95 – 96.
meaning is likely twofold. First, since he alludes to the love of God the Father in 2:1, that reference likely shapes his meaning here. The type of love he advocates is the sort of love lavished by the Father. Paul speaks of this love in Romans 5:5, where he describes the believers’ hope realized in God’s love, which is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. And in 8:35–38, Paul eloquently expresses the power of God’s love in Christ, which overtakes and overwhelms all that life throws at us; it even conquers death. This is the love Paul imagines available to the Philippians, namely, the Father’s love exhibited through the giving of his Son, Christ’s love demonstrated on the cross, and the Spirit’s love invigorating a believer’s heart.

Second, this love is to be enjoyed not only individually but also corporately. Paul acknowledged in 1:9 that the Philippians have love for each other, and he prayed for that love to overflow. Perhaps no more eloquent vision of such love is presented than in 1 Corinthians 13:4–8a: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (1 Cor 13:4–8a). Though often read at weddings, Paul’s focus to the Corinthians is life in the church, using the gifts of the Holy Spirit in love rather than in competition with each other. The call to the Philippians is similar; nothing matters except that we act in love, the sort expressed by God.

Paul’s use of “same” suggests that this love comes from the same source, namely, God. Love’s expression within the community will not always look the same—the community does not put on love as schoolchildren put on their school uniform. Rather, this love generates a proactive self-giving and a consistent, humbling self-denial. Perhaps for some in our highly individualized society, the term “same” has a negative cast. Who wants to show up at the prom with the “same” dress as another girl? Who wants to have the same bike as a playmate? We stress individuality and promote celebrity-ism that thrives on shock value and newness.

But Paul’s world was highly stratified according to class, wealth, and social rank. Sameness was horrifying to them as well, though for different reasons. Could an owner and her slave be the same? Could a Roman citizen and a Jewish immigrant be the same? “Same” cut across the social and cultural boundaries. It was great news to those on the bottom of the social pile, but unsettling to those who rode the crest of the social wave. Then or now, “same” is scary and freeing, all at the same time. Paul’s injunction to have the same love was a call to have the same view of humanity as God the Father, who is no respecter of persons (Eph 6:9), and God the Son, who died to redeem the fallen world.
Being One in Spirit (2:2c)
The next phrase of verse 2 is actually a single word that translates literally as “one-souled” and carries the idea of living in harmony. This term factors in Aristotle’s description of friends having one soul between them: “Friends have one soul between them; friends’ goods are common property; friendship is equality.”10 Paul speaks similarly in 1:27, when he asks the Philippians to have “one soul” or “one mind.” In 2:2, the term probably stands with the final phrase, “of one mind.” Paul’s overarching idea is that the Philippians act in accordance with the wisdom of God and demonstrate friendship at the level of treating each other equally and sharing resources. Said another way, the terms “same” and “one” reflect singleness of heart and mind, actualized in community through sharing of resources, honor, and life.

How is this call different from 1:27? Is Paul repeating himself here? More likely, Paul is building on his call to stand against threats from the outside by asking them to not neglect the source of their strength, which is their oneness in Christ, their fellowship with the Holy Spirit, and their access to the well-spring of God’s love—that this might overflow among them.

Call to Resist Selfish Striving (2:3a)
Having sketched the believers’ proper focus and attitude, Paul makes clear what concerns him. He pushes against any self-seeking behavior that elevates self at the expense of others. Paul warns against all “selfish ambition,” using the same term as in 1:17 to describe those who preach out of envy. The term carries the sense of having evil or malicious intentions.11

Is Paul suggesting that a similar faction exists in Philippi that stands against Paul’s ministry? Evidence within the letter for this hypothesis is lacking; indeed, the warmth and love extended to Paul by the Philippians suggests entirely the opposite. However, this term and the term translated “vain conceit” (discussed below) are also used in Galatians 5:20–26, wherein Paul describes the works of the flesh and the discord, strife, and envy that characterize such behavior. The Galatian churches were pulling away from Paul (4:12–20); could it be that such is happening with a faction in Philippi (cf. also 2 Cor 13:20)?

This hypothesis of discord between the Philippians and Paul cannot be sustained on the thin support of these two terms. Nevertheless, the fact that in Galatians 5 Paul lists fifteen attitudes and actions characteristic of the flesh, of which eight relate to issues of social discord, suggests that Paul believes

such behavior is anathema—it is a curse on the church.\textsuperscript{12} Paul’s description of the envious faction in Rome (Phil 1:17), then, is not only a snapshot of his current situation taken for the Philippians’ benefit, but it serves as a warning about the dangers of ignoring strife in a community.

The second noun, “vainglory” or “vain conceit” (\textit{kenodoxia}), is found only here in Paul, but a cognate adjective is found in Galatians 5:26, where Paul warns the Galatians against competing with each other and notes that their conceit leads to envy and strife. The word is a combination of the Greek terms “empty” and “opinion, honor.” Interestingly, in the next few verses, Paul will speak of Christ “emptying” himself and receiving “glory.”\textsuperscript{13} Paul implies a sharp contrast between the vacuous assertions of self-promotion and the releasing or giving up of what is rightfully one’s own to lift up others. In the honor-seeking Roman world, Paul’s words cut deep. In Philippi, people stressed not your character, but what was thought about your character. Perception is reality—a truism in the first century, and perhaps today as well.

**Identifying True Virtue from False Humility (2:3b)**

The believer should not care a whit about social prestige; for Paul the goal is humility. Several points bear mentioning, including Paul’s radical critique of the wider culture, the culture’s distance from our own, and Paul’s insistence on humility as a virtue in and of itself.

To the first point, the Greek term translated “humility” (\textit{tapeinophrosynē}) is not found before the Christian era, although classical Greek did have a similar term that meant “meanness of condition.”\textsuperscript{14} The word is a combination of the Greek word “lowly” and the verb “to think”—the same verb Paul used twice in 2:2 and used again in 2:5 (a total of ten times in this short letter). Recall that “to think” involves actions and attitudes. The same emphasis carries here—believers are called to imagine (or re-imagine) themselves as of lowly stature.

A parallel idea occurs in Romans 12:3, where Paul enjoins the Roman believers to carry a solid, realistic view of themselves. Imagine Jesus himself holding up a hand mirror for you. Would you preen? Or feel awkward that you even care about how coworkers, classmates, or neighbors might evaluate your appearance? With Jesus holding the mirror, would we be as inclined to think ourselves hotshots in the workplace or church social? True humility starts with the believer, knowing we are beloved children of God, joint heirs with Christ based only on his work.

\textsuperscript{13} Fee, \textit{Philippians}, 186, n 68.
\textsuperscript{14} Vincent, \textit{Philippians}, 56.
Today Christians, and many others, praise humility as a virtue. This was not the case in the Roman world; there was virtually no difference between humility and humiliation—both ended with the reality of low status. Paul’s call for humility is unprecedented in the ethics of his day; no self-respecting Gentile would concede that humility is a virtue. Deeds were to be done where people could see them and thus praise the one doing those actions. Personal self-worth and value were determined in the public sphere, not in the private reflections of the individual.

In the Jewish context, humility played a more prominent role, but not to the extent we find in Jesus’ teachings. For example, Josephus (Ant. 3.212) explains humility by pointing to Moses:

Having declined every honor that he saw that the multitude was ready to bestow upon him, [Moses] devoted himself exclusively to the veneration of God. He refrained from ascents to Sinai. Going into the Tent, he received responses from God concerning those matters that he asked, behaving as an ordinary person and conducting himself both in dress and in all other respects just like a common man and desiring to seem to be different from the majority in no respect other than this alone, to be seen caring for them.

Feldman comments that “an indication of Moses’ humility is the fact that in an era in which clothing was even more important than it is today as a sign of one’s societal standing, Moses, in Josephus’s extra-biblical comment, dresses like any ordinary person and bears himself like a simple commoner.” The rabbis believed humble servanthood was due those who held power, yet the latter should not abuse their authority. However, no one taught humility as Jesus did by using a child as an example (Matt 18:1–5). In our context today, humility is generally valued positively and is thought to be self-imposed, while humiliation carries with it a suggestion of an outside force or opponent. We decry the bully who humiliates another, and we praise people who do the right thing regardless of whether anyone notices their actions.

**Humility as a Key Christian Virtue (2:4)**

To Paul humility is a key virtue. Why? Because God is no respecter of persons. He shows no partiality. Christ is the measure of all things, and all believers are in Christ. Paul continues to explain humility by stating that the Philippians

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should look “to the interests of the others.” His point is not that humility is the means to the end of caring for others. That might leave open the door that one could use another, equally satisfactory, means to care for others. Indeed, one might argue that humility is an inefficient means to care for and be considerate of others.

If the only goal was the physical care of others, perhaps any means would be satisfactory. But the goal is far greater—namely, the obedience of each believer to the will of God (2:12–14). A prideful attitude cannot bow to God’s good purposes and might confuse one’s selfish desires with God’s will. Only from a posture of humility can one see clearly both God’s good works laid out for them and their own need for God’s strength in doing those works. The Old Testament is replete with examples of Israel challenged not to rely on its own strength, but on God’s mighty right arm to deliver (Num 11:23; Deut 4:32–35; Pss 44:3; 77:15). Paul continues this thread, now locating the power to do God’s will in the indwelling Holy Spirit.

This humility is that which considers others as surpassing oneself. Other believers’ needs should be of primary importance, not one’s own needs. This begs the question: What is a need? Paul most likely has in mind here the economic and social needs of the community. The Philippian believers likely struggled financially from their stand for Christ before their pagan neighbors. Their refusal to honor the pagan gods and the imperial cult insulted the townspeople, who then took their business elsewhere. Moreover, Paul asks the Philippian believers to forego any public honor or honor within their church community for the sake of raising up others.

This does not mean, of course, that some believers should be emotionally starved while pouring their hearts into others. Such a stance would imply that others are more deserving of love and affection. Paul is not addressing this level of human need. Rather, he is tackling the difficult situation wherein some believers conclude that others’ financial help and social care are not worth the trouble, for to offer aid would not boost their own standing in the community.

Paul clearly advocates humility; what is less certain is his call for believers to care for others. Is Paul saying that believers should not (always) look out for their own interests but also look to other believers’ interests as well? Or is it more radical? Is Paul declaring that we are not to look to our own interests at all but to the interests of others? Perhaps even asking the question in this

18. Fee, ibid., 190, notes the tension in Paul between the individual and the community and suggests that the accent falls on community here.
way signals a failure to appreciate Paul’s point. The verse aims to de-center the self, not to set up guidelines that establish when enough is enough and when you can focus on yourself. The point is that just as people work to feed themselves and their families, Paul asks that they think now of their family as much larger than those who reside in their home.

Jesus noted that the second great command is to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Matt 22:39; Mark 12:31). The assumption here is that people naturally look out for themselves. They know they must feed their bodies and keep themselves dry, warm, and hydrated. Such self-interest is not selfish; it is basic to life. The Christian is to take that basic trait and enlarge the focus to include other believers in that circle of need. We should not be surprised at this teaching because Paul taught his churches that they were the body of Christ, members of Christ’s body, the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16–17; 12:12–27; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21). I might be an eye, needing my brother “ear” and my sister “hand” to complete the body, being Christ to the world.

The Link between Exhortation and Hymn (2:5)
This bridge verse joins Paul’s call for unity and his description of Christ. It reads (lit.): “This think in you (pl.), which also in Christ Jesus.” A verb must be supplied in the second half of the verse; options include the verbs “to think” (taken from the first half of the sentence), “to have,” or “to be.” The NIV renders the verse, “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.”

In interpreting this verse, then, “the choice . . . is between a command to have the attitude that was in Christ Jesus and a command to have an attitude that belongs to those who are in him.” It comes down to whether the reader (1) sees the following verses as primarily stressing Christ as the church’s example, or (2) understands the Christ hymn as speaking doctrinally to the nature and person of Jesus Christ. In this case, believers are enjoined to hold an attitude that characterizes those who are in Christ.

Those who hold to the first reading generally see the phrase “in you” as meaning within each believer and insert “was” or “is” in the second clause (“which was/is in Christ Jesus”). In other words, Paul wants believers to show the same attitude as demonstrated by Jesus Christ. A weakness with this explanation is that 2:9–11 becomes in a sense irrelevant, as no one suggests that believers model Christ’s exaltation.

The second theory argues that “to think” should be repeated in the second

clause, which suggests that the verse instructs the Philippians to think among themselves the way they also think as believers united with Christ. The phrase “in Christ” then refers to their salvation in him. Later in the letter, Paul speaks to Euodia and Syntyche to “think in the Lord,” using the same verb and preposition “in” (4:2). A similar use of verb and preposition occurs in Romans 15:5, suggesting to Silva that Philippians 2:5 could be translated, “Be so disposed toward one another as is proper for those who are united in Christ Jesus.” Following Silva’s translation, one can draw a tight connection between 2:5 and 2:12, wherein Paul commands the Philippians to work out their salvation. The hymn is thus framed with pleas to behave as befitting a believer in Christ; believers do not think as Christ, but think as those who are “in Christ.” The community that is in Christ will seek to act as Christ did, and they will desire to study Christ’s actions in full confidence that their participation in his death and suffering will also mean their participation in his eternal life (see Rom 8:17).

What is at stake in interpreting this verse? Basically, it serves to introduce the Christ hymn, and it signals to the reader whether he or she should see Christ primarily as their example or as their Redeemer. Of course, Christ is both, but the point is where the accent lies. In the end, it is probably best not to push too hard one option over the other. The gospel message that Christ redeems sinful humanity for a life of holiness and service means that believers embrace both the humanity/divinity of Jesus Christ exalted in the hymn, as well as the demands of discipleship incumbent on those who are in Christ. “The best translation of the verse, therefore, is one that conveys the whole extent to Paul’s appeal, which is both to the attitude shown by Christ Jesus and to the attitude that is therefore appropriate to those who are ‘in him.’”

To argue that Paul strongly stresses Christ as model is too limited an interpretation, but for our ears today, to focus the interpretation on Christ as the incarnate and glorified second person of the Trinity seems too abstract. Both dissolve when we emphasize participation or union with Christ, our Redeemer, who redeems us that we might be an example of his holiness to the world.

Vanishing Unity within the Church

Why was unity so important for the church? Before addressing that question, we must think more deeply about the nature of the unity called for. As

described by Paul it seems to have two layers, the local and the global. At the local level, the church must care for every member of the community, uphold each member’s dignity and worth, and work actively to seek the others’ good. At the global level, such immediate care is not possible, but the general sense of responsibility should be evident.

The demand is not that the church interprets particular doctrines the same way or organizes church polity the same way. These things, though important, are part of a believer’s conscience (see Rom 14:1–23). Rather, the unity is at the place of participation in Christ, being a member of his body. Thus it is not the soup kitchens or other public services that mark the church, nor is it the glorious worship music composed throughout the centuries, or even the missionaries who risk life and limb to bring the good news to those who have not heard, that testifies to the reality of Christ in the church. It is the unity in the body, the oneness that results when everyone is seen as a participant in Christ.

To discover why unity is so important, we turn to Jesus’ words in John 17:20–23. Keener notes, “Just as the unity of Father and Son was central to John’s apologetic (one thus dare not oppose the Son while claiming loyalty to the Father, 10:30), the unity of believers is at the heart of John’s vision for believers (10:16; 11:52; 17:11, 21–23).”23 Keener observes that Jesus’ prayer in John 17, with its emphasis on believers’ unity, and his prayer earlier in 11:42 at the raising of Lazarus, both speak to Jesus’ origin and relation to the Father.24 Jesus states clearly that his own relationship with the Father is testified to in a tangible way in the oneness of the believing community. Jesus reoriented the focus from the temple and the law to himself as the full revelation of God and the complete witness to reconciliation with God.

Paul brought that message of reconciliation to urban communities around the Mediterranean, a society highly stratified with various ethnic groups jostling for position and staking claim over limited resources. Overlaying that was a strong separation between Jew and Gentile. This meant that crossing boundaries into another community could even be seen as treasonous, as one’s identity and livelihood were intimately tied to his or her community identity. Against this reality, Paul calls for Jews and Gentiles to live out their new status as members of the same community (Eph 2:14–22); his claims were radical and difficult to actualize.

As a way to make this unity tangible, Paul took up a collection from his churches, predominantly Gentile, for the Jewish churches in Judea. He notes that the Philippians were in the forefront of this effort; they gave sacrificially,

24. Ibid.
as Paul indicates, “in the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity…. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people” (2 Cor 8:2–4).

A critical piece of this history is the equal worth of the Jewish and Gentile communities in Paul’s eyes. He recognizes that some Gentile churches, such as the Corinthians, were in a better financial situation. But he does not translate that into a position of power over the Judean churches. Instead, he reminds his churches that they need the theological history and understanding of their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ (Rom 15:26–27; 2 Cor 8:13–15).

Strengthening Unity in the Global Church
A similar situation faces the global church today, as Western Christians have a surplus of wealth and Christians in the global South have great financial needs. A problem is that some Western Christians also believe that they bring superior theological perspective to the South. Fortunately this is changing, as more American churches and mission societies are forming true partnerships with churches in Africa, Latin America, and the East. These relationships are a two-way street, with both communities learning from each other and each group taking stock of their own weakness and blind spots.

For example, the African church holds up a mirror to the American church that shows the pervasiveness of its individualism. And the American church holds up a mirror to the African church that highlights the damage that corruption and bribes create in their midst. This give-and-take requires humility and sacrifice, which leads to the unity Paul describes as a unity that can only be explained by God’s power. It supersedes social norms of ethnic and social separatism. It is gained by vulnerability, humility, and seeking first the other’s good.

Carrie Boren experienced this power of partnership during a Mission Africa25 trip in September 2010, an outreach connected with Cape Town 2010. She was part of a four-member team that included a Presbyterian and an Anglican, both from Texas, and a nondenominational evangelist from England. They worked with a Zimbabwean evangelist named Orpheus, who organized events with forty churches from various denominations. Throughout the week, this group joined with local African churches to preach the

The World Is Waiting and Watching

What is interesting is that the wider world gets it; people expect the church to be unified. In the ground-breaking book *Half the Sky*, the authors Nicolas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (a husband/wife team) challenge the American church to care for the women in Africa as much as it does for the unborn fetuses in the United States (a reference to the abortion lobby).26 Underlying the argument is the sense that if the church is really global, Christians with means (as in the West) should be supporting in meaningful ways their brothers and sisters in need. The unity of the church, in other words, should have a tangible presence.

Carolyn Custis James takes up that challenge in her book *Half the Church*. She notes that Christians are quick to volunteer in emergencies, but they “miss the chronic, systemic tragedies that are snatching one anonymous life at a time.”27 Moreover, the American church is caught up in drawing lines about where and when women can serve within the local church. Yet James reminds us that the Bible’s vision of women differs sharply from the views that allow women to be discarded, objectified, trafficked, silenced, and degraded because it declares in the opening scene that women and men have equal value: “He gives both male and female the exact same identity — to be his image bearers.”28 She notes that believers have the obligation to demonstrate to those who have not heard the good news that “every human being is God’s image bearer…. Every human being possesses a derived significance — grounded in God himself.”29

Carolyn James relates an example of such demonstration. A four-year-old girl in India had been legally married to a much older man, although she still lived at home. Her husband suddenly died, and she was destined for sati or the
funeral pyre of her husband. 30 But before this could happen, her older brother wakened her in the middle of the night and secreted her out of the house to a missionary couple’s care. This girl grew up to be a godly grandmother, whose granddaughter testifies to God’s great work. 31 Yet the wounds of life can be deep; this little girl experienced a wrenching away from her family. Without succumbing to pessimism or minimizing tragedy, James encourages readers that “conflict reinforces our need for God, drives us to him, forces us to look at him more closely, and deepens our trust.” 32 From this place of deepened trust, local churches, missions, and parachurch groups model the reality of God’s love and care for all humans.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Call to Unity

During the rise of Nazism in Germany, the young German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer discovered afresh the supreme importance of church unity. He established a Preachers’ Seminary, located in Finkenwalde, Germany, in 1935. It was closed by the Gestapo two years later, but during the two years it was open, Bonhoeffer sought to live out the gospel’s call for unity. In 1939, he published Life Together, a reflection of his experience at the seminary. In it he declares: “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this.” 33 Bonhoeffer’s community was tested severely in the coming years as Nazism grew and the Confessing Church was persecuted. But in these increasingly dangerous times, he wrote about the unique power of Christian community:

Worldly wisdom knows what distress and weakness and failure are, but it does not know the godlessness of man. And so it also does not know that man is destroyed only by his sin and can be healed only by forgiveness. Only the Christian knows this. In the presence of a psychiatrist I can only be a sick man; in the presence of a Christian brother I can dare to be a sinner. The psychiatrist must first search my heart and yet he never plumbs its ultimate depth. The Christian brother knows when I come to him: here is a sinner like myself, a godless man who wants to confess and yearns for God’s forgiveness. The psychiatrist views me as if there were no God. The brother views me as I am before the judging and merciful God in the Cross of Jesus Christ. 34

30. The traditional funeral in India includes burning the body on a structure or a stack of wood called a pyre.
31. James, Half the Church, 79, 95–96.
32. Ibid., 96.
34. Ibid., 119.
Hubris Masquerading as Humility

True humility is a rare find, and often what passes for humility is really gluttony or self-centeredness cloaked in apparent self-denial. C. S. Lewis captures the latter brilliantly in his *Screwtape Letters*.

In this imaginative letter exchange between a minor demon, sent to trip up a new believer, and his mentor, the latter mentions to his charge that the believer’s mother should be encouraged in her belief of her humility—for she is anything but humble. Rather than accept tea and toast at friend’s house, she will “humbly” state that she can’t eat toast, only muffins, but that she does not want the friend to trouble herself to get her muffins. And of course she can’t drink tea on its own, so she just won’t have anything. Of course, the friend ends up doing twice as much work for the “humble” woman who nevertheless thinks she is humble. We’ve all been around those who are demanding and require lots of work to make happy—while these folks maintain they are just simple and easy natured.

“Look not to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.” Simple words, but hard to follow. The point of networking is so that you might gain a friend who can help you in work—very calculating, and at bottom driven by self-interest. We make decisions about “investing” in people with an eye to “return”—perhaps in referrals, or jobs for our kids, or introductions to clients. Church members not socially connected or with any apparent skills that we might at some point draw on are not befriended for they are judged not to be a good use of our time. Such an arrogant posture assumes that we know what we need and can control our future.

Babysitting and Tattoos

Looking to others’ interests is often no more than seeing a need and thinking creatively. A friend told me this story about his son’s girlfriend. While in middle school, her parents led a ministry for young couples involved extensively in ministry. She observed marriage crises and the sense of “burnout” that intense ministry can bring on a family and a church. From that experience, she became convinced that couples need time to connect with each other as a way to cope with the pressures of intense ministry. So when she started college, she committed herself to offer free babysitting to couples of her college church who were deep in ministry, including the pastoral staff, counselors, and certain church members. She did this faithfully during her time in college and now has four other young women doing the same volunteer work.

Sometimes we wonder if there is really anything we can do to alleviate

suffering; the problems seem so big, and our capabilities so small. But seeking God and allowing for some creative possibilities often lead to surprising results. Chris Baker, a tattoo artist, came to faith as an adult. Desiring to use his talents for Christ, Chris began praying how he might serve. He discovered that gang members often marked their bodies, making it difficult to leave the gang. He decided to volunteer to remake or cover up those body-inscribed indications of gang activity.

As he worked with law enforcement and ex-gang members, he learned of another group of people who are tattooed—victims of human sex trafficking. They have an image, or even a bar code, tattooed on the neck, back, or buttocks. Chris designs beautiful flowers or shooting stars to cover the marks of human slavery, redeeming the ugly mark of sex slavery with an image of beauty and color. This free gift of artwork changes a symbol of bondage to a statement of new life, free from the past. Baker’s work represents in a physical sense the spiritual reality that a believer is a new creature in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) and is sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13–14).

Examples of Serving the Interests of Others
Paul would encourage those who have little in the world’s eyes not to despise what they have, but to use that to help fellow believers. In other words, no act of service is too small to be unimportant. An example of such service recently came to my attention. One of my husband’s colleagues has a severely handicapped daughter who suffers from seizures, necessitating sudden trips to the hospital. Their neighbor, a retired man with no medical skills, discovered that this family has a dog. This neighbor loves dogs and enjoys walking them. So he offered to walk the dog morning and evening every day. It was his way of saying, “I’m here; I want to help.” I include this example because I think it was just this sort of “little” thing that Paul is thinking about here. He wanted the church in Philippi to embrace the needs of others in their midst, even the seemingly minor things, rather than think their efforts might be too insignificant.

Sometimes small acts of kindness become life-changing events. On February 18, 1942, the US Navy destroyer *Truxtun* was escorting the *USS Pollux*, which carried supplies for the Allies in Europe. A terrible winter storm blew up, rendering the navigational equipment useless. Both the *Truxtun* and the *Pollux* ran aground off the coast of Newfoundland and were torn apart by the high waves and savage wind. Few reached land alive. One fortunate soldier was an African-American mess attendant, Lanier Philipps, from Georgia. He

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was covered in oil, soaking wet and freezing, as he began to walk toward a village. He fainted on his journey but was found, put on a sled, and brought to town, where a group of women were cleaning and bandaging the soldiers.

As Mr. Phillips tells the story, he awoke to find the women cleaning his now naked body—he a black man, naked in the presence of white women. Back in Georgia, simply talking to a white woman could lead to a beating or even hanging. Yet these women kept up their massaging of his limbs, trying to restore circulation and prevent permanent damage from the cold. They were rubbing his arms and legs not only to keep them warm, but also to remove the oil that had spilled from the sinking vessel and covered his wet body. Soon Mr. Phillips realized that they had never seen a black man, because they kept trying to get the dark color off his skin. Later, one of the women, Violet Pike, took Mr. Phillips to her house to continue his convalescence until the Navy could collect him the following day. She fed him, clothed him, and treated him as if he was her own son. Such generosity overwhelmed Mr. Phillips, whose boyhood school had been burned by the KKK. Her kindness offered to him a new vision of racial relations and a new conviction to work for civil rights. Mr. Phillips became the first African American in the Navy’s history to hold the post of sonar technician (1957). He endured the difficult journey for equal rights and reconciliation in large part because of the vision cast by Violet Pike, a vision created not by eloquent words but by the simple acts of cleaning and feeding a dirty, half-frozen sailor.

In the case of the dog-walking neighbor, we see that simple jobs done with faithfulness can yield a rich harvest of blessing for the recipient. But what happens to the one giving? He or she learns the hard, yet rewarding virtue of perseverance. What of the WWII veteran and his life-saving friend, Violet? The life-threatening emergency became a life-changing event that shattered prejudices and fears. Racial stereotypes could not stand against ordinary human acts of kindness. Everyone can be that neighbor who walks the dog, the Violet who extends simple meals and basic necessities to those others forgot or despise. Neither act requires lots of money, time, or skilled talent—only the willingness to see another’s needs and the willingness to help.

Why We Resist Giving Praise
How often do we feel less valuable or honored, even slighted, when we hear someone else praised? We are reluctant to give honor to another, or praise another from our heart, because we imagine that honor is a set quantity—it is

like a glass full of water or a bucket full of sand. As we sip the water or shovel out the sand, the amount grows less. In the same way, we imagine that if we give a bit of praise here and a bit of praise there, we will soon be left with no praise. Or we think that in any given day or particular event, there is only so much praise and honor to go around. So if on this day the boss praises your coworker, then he or she must implicitly be removing praise from your “inbox.” But this is entirely the wrong way to see honor and praise in the kingdom. Praise for one person’s good efforts, attitudes, and heart does not pull from some heavenly storehouse, thereby reducing the overall amount of praise left to dole out. Rather, praise from God springs from an unending source of love.

Perhaps an analogy will help. When my firstborn son was born, I thought my heart would burst of love for him. Two years later we had our daughter. I wondered while pregnant how I could possibly love another child as much as I love our son, for I love him 100 percent. But I discovered that “love arithmetic” is not like earthly math, for I love our daughter 100 percent, with that same overwhelming joy. That same “heavenly math” works in the praise department; one believer’s honor does not diminish the other believers’ honor. This means that believers can be free with their praise, not clinging to it out of fear of their own loss of face.
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The Word of God may not change, but culture does. Think of what we have seen in the last twenty years: we now communicate predominantly through the internet and email; we read our news on iPads and computers; we can talk on the phone to our friends while we are driving, while we are playing golf, while we are taking long walks; and we can get in touch with others from the middle of nowhere. We carry in our hands small devices that connect us to the world and to a myriad of sources of information. Churches have changed; the “Nones” are rising in numbers and volume, and atheists are bold to assert their views in public forums. The days of home Bible studies are waning, there is a marked rise in activist missional groups in churches, and pastors are more and more preaching topical sermons, some of which are not directly connected to the Bible. Divorce rates are not going down, marriages are more stressed, rearing children is more demanding, and civil unions and same-sex marriages are knocking at the door of the church.

Progress can be found in many directions. While church attendance numbers are waning in Europe and North America, churches are growing in the South and the East. More and more women are finding a voice in churches; the plea of the former generation of leaders that Christians be concerned not just with evangelism but with justice is being answered today in new and vigorous ways. Resources for studying the Bible are more available today than ever before, and preachers and pastors are meeting the challenge of speaking a sure Word of God into shifting cultures.

Readers of the Bible change, too. These cultural shifts, our own personal developments, the progress in intellectual questions, as well as growth in biblical studies and theology and discoveries of new texts and new paradigms for understanding the contexts of the Bible—each of these elements works on an interpreter so that the person who reads the Bible today asks different questions from different angles.

Culture shifts, but the Word of God remains. That is why we as editors of The Story of God Bible Commentary series, a commentary based on the New International Version 2011 (NIV 2011), are excited to participate in this new series of commentaries on the Bible. This series is designed to address this generation with the same Word of God. We are asking the authors to explain
what the Bible says to the sorts of readers who pick up commentaries so they can understand not only what Scripture says but what it means for today. The Bible does not change, but relating it to our culture changes constantly and in differing ways in different contexts.

When we, the New Testament editors, sat down in prayer and discussion to choose authors for this series, we realized we had found fertile ground. Our list of potential authors staggered in length and quality. We wanted the authors to be exceptional scholars, faithful Christians, committed evangelicals, and theologically diverse, and we wanted this series to represent the changing face of both American and world evangelicalism: ethnic and gender diversity. I believe this series has a wider diversity of authors than any commentary series in evangelical history.

The title of this series, emphasizing as it does the “Story” of the Bible, reveals the intent of the series. We want to explain each passage of the Bible in light of the Bible’s grand Story. The Bible’s grand Story, of course, connects this series to the classic expression *regula fidei*, the “rule of faith,” which was the Bible’s story coming to fulfillment in Jesus as the Messiah, Lord, and Savior of all. In brief, we see the narrative built around the following biblical themes: creation and fall, covenant and redemption, law and prophets, and especially God’s charge to humans as his image-bearers to rule under God. The theme of God as King and God’s kingdom guides us to see the importance of Israel’s kings as they come to fulfillment in Jesus, Lord and King over all, and the direction of history toward the new heavens and new earth, where God will be all in all. With these guiding themes, each passage is examined from three angles.

**Listen to the Story.** We believe that if the Bible is God speaking, then the most important posture of the Christian before the Bible is to listen. So our first section cites the text of Scripture and lists a selection of important biblical and sometimes noncanonical parallels; then each author introduces that passage. The introductions to the passages sometimes open up discussion to the theme of the passage while other times they tie this passage to its context in the specific book. But since the focus of this series is the Story of God in the Bible, the introduction leads the reader into reading this text in light of the Bible’s Story.

**Explain the Story.** The authors follow up listening to the text by explaining each passage in light of the Bible’s grand Story. This is not an academic series, so the footnotes are limited to the kinds of texts typical Bible readers and preachers readily will have on hand. Authors are given the freedom to explain the text as they read it, though you should not be surprised to find occasional listings of other options for reading the text. Authors explore
biblical backgrounds, historical context, cultural codes, and theological interpretations. Authors engage in word studies and interpret unique phrases and clauses as they attempt to build a sound and living reading of the text in light of the Story of God in the Bible.

Authors will not shy away from problems in the texts. Whether one is examining the meaning of “perfect” in Matthew 5:48, the complexities with Christology in the hymn of Philippians 2:6–11, the challenge of understanding Paul in light of the swirling debates about the old, new, and post-new perspectives, the endless debates about eschatology, or the vagaries of atonement theories, the authors will dive in, discuss evidence, and do their best to sort out a reasonable and living reading of those issues for the church today.

**Live the Story.** Reading the Bible is not just about discovering what it meant back then; the intent of The Story of God Bible Commentary series is to probe how this text might be lived out today as that story continues to march on in the life of the church. At times our authors will tell stories about what this looks like; at other times they may offer some suggestions for living it out; but always you will discover the struggle involved as we seek to live out the Bible’s grand Story in our world.

We are not offering suggestions for “application” so much as digging deeper; we are concerned in this section with seeking out how this text, in light of the Story of God in the Bible, compels us to live in our world so that our own story lines up with the Bible’s Story.

Scot McKnight, general editor New Testament
Lynn Cohick, Joel Willitts, and Michael Bird, editors
“Getting a story is about more than merely enjoying it. It means hearing it, understanding it, and above all, being impacted by it. This commentary series hopes that its readers not only hear and understand the story, but are impacted by it to live in as Christian a way as possible. The editors and contributors set that table very well and open up the biblical story in ways that move us to act with sensitivity and understanding. That makes hearing the story as these authors tell it well worth the time. Well done.”

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Executive Director of Cultural Engagement, Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership and Cultural Engagement,  
Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies  
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Senior Pastor
North Point Ministries

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Judy Douglass
Author, Speaker, Encourager
Office of the President, Cru
Director of Women’s Resources, Cru

“The Bible is the story of God and his dealings with humanity from creation to new creation. The Bible is made up more of stories than of any other literary genre. Even the psalms, proverbs, prophecies, letters, and the Apocalypse make complete sense only when set in the context of the grand narrative of the entire Bible. This commentary series breaks new ground by taking all these observations seriously. It asks commentators to listen to the text, to explain the text, and to live the text. Some of the material in these sections overlaps with introduction, detailed textual analysis and application, respectively, but only some. The most riveting and valuable part of the commentaries are the stories that can appear in any of these sections, from any part of the globe and any part of church history, illustrating the text in any of these areas. Ideal for preaching and teaching.”

Craig L. Blomberg
Distinguished Professor of New Testament
Denver Seminary
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