

TRAVELING LIGHT

LETTING GO OF THE SOUL'S GREATEST BURDENS

A STUDY OF PHILIPPIANS

SESSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Acts 16:6-40

Our day began on an ambitious note as we looked over a map of the Great Smokey Mountains with the park ranger standing across from us. “Which campsite is the highest?” my friend asked. It was our third summer adventure as a group of friends. But until that point our camping destinations had been limited to those that could be reached by car. That day, we would go deep into the woods for our first time. The ranger pointed to Mt. Sterling just across the border from Tennessee into North Carolina. It was a two mile hike, two thousand feet higher in elevation. But it was nothing we hadn’t done before.

After arriving at the base of the trail, we popped the trunk of the car to start sorting through our belongings. On our previous summer’s trip we were well prepared. We had an eight man tent to sleep half that many people. Our cooler was full of beef, potatoes, carrots, tomatoes and seasoning for what one of the guys called a “hobo meal.” He must have been kidding because after slowly cooking the mix over the fire, it became something fit for a king. Another one of the guys tugged along a personal sleeping bag that could easily fit a small family and cover our giant tent in the rain. We affectionately called it the Big Monster. This summer we didn’t hold back either.

But as I watched my friends pull out everything they planned to haul up that mountain, it suddenly dawned on me that this wasn’t going to work. My friends were more optimistic and agreed to take the majority of the load. By the time one swung the mega tent over his shoulder and clung to the handle of his sleeping bag that was about the same size, the other one had the full sized cooler stretched across his arms with some of his other belongings on top. It was such an odd sight at first to see them, arms filled with smiles on their faces. They might as well have been carrying their own caskets.

That ended up being a hard night. We were still pushing through the pain at 10 pm. The forest was black, and we kept second guessing whether we had missed our turn. And that’s not to mention the rain that came down and soaked us. We eventually

reached our campsite and were able to get the tent up during a slight break in the weather. The guys even got a campfire going on top of that. But that's the last year we brought a giant cooler or the Big Monster into the backwoods.

Not everyone has made the mistake of over-packing for a mountain hike. But it's likely that you've had too much on your plate at one time or another. Chances are you've carried emotional and relational burdens that slow you down and keep you from being your best self. Maybe you've come to a point in your life where you've accepted some challenging realities but you'd give anything not to feel the way you do toward them. There's a good chance you are experiencing some of those feelings even now.

There are some weights we carry that God never designed us to. And we can lay those burdens down as we respond to his invitation to experience freedom.

The Apostle Paul was one of the leaders of the early church responsible for spreading the message about Jesus throughout Asia Minor and parts of southern Europe. He is also responsible for penning most of the New Testament and passing along to us a lot of what we know about Jesus. In Paul's journeys through Macedonia, he stopped at the wealthy and important city of Philippi. It was there that he and his traveling companions met a woman named Lydia and introduced her to Jesus. Eventually, the church at Philippi was born and added to its number. A jailer received Jesus after Paul prevented him from taking his own life over the miraculous release of his prisoners. And many other people became a part of the church there including people we'll read about like Euodia and Syntyche, Clement and Epaphroditus.

The church of Philippi was a generous church that received the message about Jesus with joy. But as time went on, they too became encumbered by conflicts, fears about God's provision, messages about religious duty and insecurities about their relationship with Paul. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul invites them to be free of all of that. And God working through the Holy Spirit thousands of years ago was preparing a message that would invite us to be free as well – to unload and walk with liberated steps because of the simple life God calls us to and the burdensome one he encourages us to leave behind.

Join with me in the coming weeks and prepare your hearts to hear from God's heart about the light journey he has prepared for you. Welcome to the book of Philippians.

1. THE WEIGHT OF INSECURITY

Philippians 1:3-11, 2:12-18, 2:25-30, 4:10-19

On March 12th of 1951, a new comic character hit the stands in Britain from creator George Moonie. The character was a young boy whose dog named Gnasher enjoyed running after and biting postmen as a favorite pastime. This young boy had a penchant for trouble himself, and he caused plenty of it with his trademark slingshot. Moonie was attending a music hall when he heard a lyric that inspired his infamous character: “I’m Dennis the Menace from Venice.”

On the other side of the pond, Hank Ketcham was coming up with his own character. Ketcham had previously worked with the Walt Disney Company and had participated on pictures like *Bambi* and *Pinnocchio*. After World War II ended, he started to work as a cartoon artist. One day his wife Alice discovered that their toddler Dennis, who was supposed to be napping, had dumped out the contents of their dresser drawers, tore down their curtains and overturned their mattress. “Your son is a menace!” she told Ketcham. The phrase stuck. And it just so happened that shortly after, the American Dennis the Menace was born with his mischievous dog Ruff and his trademark slingshot on March 12th of 1951. It arrived on stands the very same day as its British counterpart.

Someone cried foul. It didn’t take long for the two to learn of each other because Dennis the Menace became a hit in both countries. You can imagine that if something like that happened today, companies would be brewing a billion-dollar lawsuit. But the truth is that there was no mischief in the matter of the two Dennises. It was simply one of the most remarkable coincidences in publishing history.

What a terrible feeling it is to be ripped off or used. It’s one of the reasons that people have such low trust levels for certain professions like lawyers, used car salesmen, and, yes, the surveys are true – even pastors today. That’s not because all lawyers, car salesmen or pastors are bad. It’s because some take advantage of people in difficult situations. People are manipulated, and they end up feeling more like things than human beings as a result.

But what we do when that feeling of being taken advantage of simply isn't true or exaggerated? What if the perceived injustice is just a coincidence of Dennis the Menace proportions? There have been times in my life where my feelings and self-confidence have been so fragile that I've even perceived a kind word to be a slight. One day a friend of mine told me that our theater coach really hoped to get a fellow classmate involved in the high school play. Apparently, my classmate wasn't persuaded. So in response, my coach said, "That's okay, I have a Nuxoll" referring to me. I'm pretty sure he meant that as a compliment – perhaps an expression of gratefulness that he had a guy in my class to be a part of the program. But when I heard that response second-hand, it dug underneath my skin. "What does he mean by that? Would he prefer my classmate? Was I just a consolation prize?"

Today we call that being thin-skinned. Counselors call it insecurity. Our own lack of self-confidence causes us to assign blame or presume false motives when there aren't any. We might assume that we are underappreciated, overlooked or unloved, and we magnify some slight as a result. We might exaggerate a minor insult or treat a lack of attention as a personal snub.

But deep down, we really don't want to carry that burden. It just produces bitterness, anger and distrust in us. And that spoils and sours our relationships. Wouldn't it be nice to be free of all of that – to be able to enjoy meaningful relationships without bringing that kind of baggage to the table? How can we unpack insecurity from our souls to keep our relationships alive?

A surface reading of Paul's letter to the Philippians may not reveal it, but there is a good chance that Paul's relationship with the church was starting to show some cracks for that very same reason. The Bible never uses the word "insecurity" – but we see the effects of it all over. And chances are that that's one of the big reasons Paul found himself writing to the Philippians. Not only does Paul skillfully build his readers back up, but he also finds wise ways to coach them to think and feel better things. And we can think and feel the same.

But first, let's consider the evidence for the strain in Paul's relationship with the church. Paul's letter to the Philippians is a favorite of many, and one of the reasons it is so popular is both because Paul frequently invites his readers to experience joy and he speaks of them in glowing terms. The opening is basically a love letter affirming his affection for them. It's not uncommon for Paul to speak with this encouraging

language, but Philippians stands out. And it was right for Paul to feel that way about them. He even says that (1:7). The Philippian church was one of the most generous, hard-working churches that Paul had ever partnered with.

But Paul felt so concerned that they might have believed differently about his affection for them that he does something out of the ordinary. In Philippians 1:8 he says, “God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.” He calls God himself to be a witness. The author of Hebrews wrote, “the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument” (6:16). In other words, making an oath was serious business. Jesus generally warned against doing that because a person’s word should be good enough to establish trustworthiness (Matt 5:33-37). But in this case, Paul felt like he had to go even further to rebuild trust. It appears that the Philippians were starting to question whether Paul really cared about them.

How could this be? Paul calls many of them co-workers (4:3) and reaffirms the lengths they went to in order to meet his needs (4:16). There is a chance that the church started to question whether Paul was taking advantage of them. We get a couple of hints of that. The first has to do with someone the Philippians sent from the church to care for Paul named Epaphroditus. Paul writes this:

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. (Philippians 2:25-28)

Many Bible teachers believe that this little section of the letter is the biggest reason Paul chose to write the church. Paul doesn’t say it directly, but the church is upset. Epaphroditus got sick and after the church heard about the poor condition of one of their own, it began to trouble them. *Was Paul looking out for Epaphroditus? Are we at risk of losing him? Paul, what else will you be asking us to give? Do you even care about us?*

This news had gotten back to Paul, which caused both he and Epaphroditus to have anxiety. So Paul decided to send a healthy Epaphroditus back so that when they saw him they might “be glad.” Paul’s invitation to rejoice throughout the letter is not simply a blanket encouragement for Christian living; it’s a call to lift their spirits.

But that's not the only hint of insecurity we see building in Philippi. In 4:17 Paul says, "Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account." In another passage where Paul goes to lengths to affirm their giving, he tries to clarify his motives. *It's not about my personal advancement*, he argues. *Your giving is about your spiritual investment*. Why clarify his motives at all if Paul didn't suspect that the Philippians were questioning them?

Paul's need to strongly reaffirm his affection for the Philippians, the distress they experienced over Epaphroditus and concerns about Paul's motives all suggest that the church felt unloved, overlooked and perhaps used by Paul. Given Paul's strong statements to the contrary, there is a good chance that Paul wasn't guilty of any of that. But that didn't erase the fact that they felt that way.

Even in its inceptive years, the church was messy. Insecurity had taken a foothold at Philippi and suddenly became a threat to God's amazing building effort among that group of people.

Paul found himself in a difficult place. He needed to continue to encourage the church to be obedient to God's will. But he was also wary that asking more of them would only add to the negative feelings and justify their conclusions. How could Paul relieve them of this burden without doing any more damage? And how might those of us who are weighed down by insecurities, experience the same freedom Paul sought for the Philippians?

Notice what Paul says in Philippians 2:12-13:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.
(Philippians 2:12-13)

Paul opens with an affirmation of their obedience and encourages them to continue in it. He doesn't say who the obedience is to. He leaves that open-ended for a moment because perhaps they believed their burden was obedience to him.

Their continued obedience is "working out [their] salvation." This expression has troubled a lot of Christians because salvation seems to be one of the last things someone can work out. Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9 that "it is by grace you are saved—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works..." A surface

reading of the two ideas seems to pit them against each other. But verse ten of Ephesians 2 releases some of the tension: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” We weren’t saved by good works, but we were saved for them. When a person continues to work out their salvation as Paul says in Philippians 2, they are putting the grace of God to work to produce its intended goal – a life pleasing to God.

But Paul adds another curious expression. He says to do this all “with fear and trembling.” And the explanation that he gives is as follows: “For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” Fear? Trembling? In another letter, John suggests that we have no reason to fear God: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

Perhaps it might help to distinguish what kind of fear we are talking about. John’s fear has to do with a person’s final destination. And John’s claim is that the one who accepts Jesus has no reason for such fear. Paul’s “fear and trembling” have more to do with the awesome presence of God – conceptualizing and experiencing his majesty. This invokes wonder, but it also unnerves and rattles the soul when it touches something so powerful and vast beyond description. It’s like walking up to the edge of the Grand Canyon. It is beautiful beyond measure. It’s inspiring. And yet coming close to its edge is unsettling and intimidating. And Paul says this limitless power with unending beauty is working within us.

What does Paul mean by all of this? While Paul expresses certainty that they have been obedient, he doesn’t say to whom. The note about obedience in his presence and even more in his absence may suggest that they were acting in some ways out of obedience and allegiance to him. If that’s the case, Paul shifts the focus by grounding their continued spiritual investment in the greatness of God instead. It wasn’t Paul who was working in them. It wasn’t Paul they were working for. It was God.

What may be subtle here is stated in no uncertain terms in Philippians 4:17, a verse we looked at earlier. “Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.” Paul’s work among the Philippians was never about building a relationship with them to use them for his own benefit. It was about giving them the opportunity to build a relationship with God.

The truth is, when our service becomes people-centered, our service suffers from the law of diminishing returns. It makes sense, really. Even if you get to marry “the perfect” guy or work for your dream employer, the sheen eventually wears off. You see the imperfections in people. And the motivation to serve with excellence when they’re out of sight starts to wane. Paul may have seen the need to ground their work in the greatness of God again. He wanted to remind them that his invitation to continue living and sacrificing big was not to serve him but to connect them to the Almighty and powerful God who pieced the elements together and sculpted the universe.

How does all of this connect with those of us who long for relief from the weight of insecurity? Behind insecurity stand tall expectations of other people. We expect our spouses to show affection in certain ways. We expect our co-workers to receive all of our ideas. We expect that our friendships will always stay the same. And we fear what it says about us when they don’t. Relationships become a series of deals, transactions and compromises. And love is choked out by unwieldy, unrealistic and unfair expectations.

But if we serve, love and partner with people first and foremost out of our love for God and our desire to please him, we free ourselves from the need to get something back from people and the fear of rejection when we don’t. When our service is focused on God, (1) we’re free to love others without any expectation of return, (2) we’re guaranteed a spiritual profit and (3) everything we do has value and meaning because the God who shaped the mountains and seas is not just working alongside us – he’s working *inside* of us.

We can cast aside the weight of insecurity by adopting a God-centered approach to all we do. We’re not playing for our basketball coaches. We’re not studying for our teachers. We’re not simply working for our bosses. We’re doing it for him.

What if instead of wondering where your relationship with your boss, your spouse or your friends stood, you felt free to be yourself because you were confident of where your most important relationship stood? What if instead of giving more and working harder to please people, you could give freely without carrying the burden of expecting their approval? And what if instead of carrying the burdens of the distrust, hurt or anger of unmet expectations, your soul could be free?

We don't know how the church at Philippi absorbed this letter, but I like to imagine that some of their wounds started to heal as they heard Paul's reaffirmation of affection and as they received Epaphroditus back. But even more, I like to imagine that as good as some of their relationships were, they took another step forward – that people started to freely relate to each other and freely give without strings attached. Maybe as they reconsidered the greatness of God, a movement began to send more people out to assist Paul's mission, serve their communities and love their neighbors next door. And maybe those same neighbors were irresistibly drawn to know Jesus by a liberated love flowing out of the church and into them. I can't help but think that God wants the same thing for us too.

2. THE WEIGHT OF UNCERTAINTY

Philippians 1:6, 1:12-26

Thirteen years after he became one of the first victims of the Columbine school shooting on April 20, 1999, Richard Castaldo revealed a secret about that dark day. He and his friend Rachel Scott were sitting outside of the cafeteria when the two gunmen initially unloaded a round of bullets into the two of them. They were wounded badly. Castaldo's spinal cord was shattered leaving him paralyzed. Rachel was shot several times in the chest. Castaldo asked Rachel if she was okay even though he knew she wasn't. She was crying and in a lot of pain.

One of the gunmen returned to the scene shortly after. And according to Castaldo, he approached Rachel and asked her if she believed in God. Castaldo first remembered her saying, "You know I do." That's when the gunman finished the job and shot her dead. And that's why Castaldo believed he shot her.

But Castaldo never initially shared what happened next. The gunman pointed his rifle at him and asked him the same question. "I told him 'no,' and I'm alive because of it."¹

People of faith can't turn away when hearing stories like Rachel's. These acts of bravery inspire us to be more courageous and bold. And yet there's a chance we experience something else as we imagine ourselves in Rachel's shoes staring down the end of a barrel facing the most important question of our lives. Would we go the way of Rachel? Or would we go the way of Castaldo?

Chances are that there is at least a small part of you that isn't so sure. Maybe some memory of a missed opportunity to share your faith comes back to mind. Or perhaps you are filled with the regret of not telling a coworker, a friend or a family member about Jesus. Those of us who have experienced the amazing life and love that God

¹ Preston, Keith. "The Survivor: Richard Castaldo Challenges the Official Columbine Narrative." Attack the System, 10 May 2012, <https://attackthesystem.com/2012/04/17/the-survivor-richard-castaldo-challenges-the-official-columbine-narrative/>.

offers all through Jesus know that it's too good not to share. That's why the prospect of failing to honor him and failing to offer that free gift to others floods us with shame and makes some of us wonder how we would really respond in a life or death situation. You might find a small voice in your head saying, "I'm not good enough" or, "My faith isn't strong enough." And sometimes this self-doubt and uncertainty keep us from moving forward. Our fear of failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We end up reinforcing bad thoughts and act on them naturally out of a negative belief system.

Wouldn't it be nice to know that we could live a full, confident spiritual life with strong convictions and a deep sense of God's work and involvement in our lives? How can we overcome the unsureness and self-doubt that can make our faith so unstable? The Apostle Paul models a few principles to help us cast aside the weight of uncertainty and confidently continue in God's plan for us.

But before we consider the hope that Paul gives us, let's take a realistic look at life. Most of you don't need to be told that life is difficult. You know it from personal experiences of one kind or another. Some of you wrestle with money and have your entire life. Others struggle with their health. And for the few who have never had to wonder if they'd find good work and never had a broken bone, life's many relational challenges have certainly come their way.

But the Christian life was always going to be decidedly more difficult. In Philippians 1:27-30 Paul encourages his readers to strive together for the good news of Jesus. You should do this, he says to them, "without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him..."

Paul is writing this from prison. He considers it a good possibility that he will die for his faith there. So just as he has decided to take courage, he invites his readers to do the same in the midst of opposition.

Then he says, "This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved." It seems like Paul is saying that the Christian's fearlessness in the face of opposition is a sign to their opponents that God will judge their opponents and save them. But Paul originally wrote this letter in Greek, and this is just one possible English translation. A word for word translation opens up another possibility: "This is

a sign to them of destruction but for you of salvation.” Paul never actually says who is at risk of destruction. It’s implied. And there is a good chance that what Paul actually meant is that when the Christians’ opponents looked at their fearlessness in the face of opposition, they saw foolishness. They thought the Christians were inviting *their own* destruction. And that makes sense if the Christians had no hope beyond this life.

But Paul counters that by saying, “No, your fearlessness in the face of persecution is proof that you are God’s children.” And then he answers why in the following statement: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.”

That’s not a statement that fits with modern sensibilities. The first part makes sense. God gave us the opportunity to believe in him. We wouldn’t know him unless he revealed himself to us. But why has God also given us the opportunity to suffer on Christ’s behalf? And why call that a gift?

As much as we might not like suffering, there is probably no better way to demonstrate the value of something and show our confidence in it than by suffering for it. You can tell a lot about how much someone wants something by what they are willing to give up for it. But you can tell even more about how much they want it by what sort of pain they are willing to take on. You know that a son loves his disabled father when he fights his own back pain to lift him up a set of stairs. You know that a poor mother loves her children when she endures the gnaw of her hungry stomach to make sure her boys and girls have enough to eat. You know that a savior loves the world when he says yes to tools that will suffocate his lungs, pierce his hands and tear his flesh. You know that he loves them when he offers his soul as an altar to burn away all of their sins.

Suffering on behalf of Christ is a gift because it gives us an opportunity to demonstrate the supreme value of Christ to a world that’s passing away and our confidence that something better is coming. We know that a thing is well made when it lasts under the harshest conditions. Our endurance under persecution shows not only that we have been remade well but also that the one we cling to and the hope he offers is worth everything.

But chances are that most people who are a part of this conversation don’t see the kind of persecution Paul was experiencing. We sometimes take insults. We may not be welcomed into certain communities. There are times we’re denied work. Even if

persecution is increasing globally, many Christians live in a part of the world where it's easy enough to be a Christian without suffering. What do we do with all of that?

First, it's important to know that suffering isn't something we chase. If it's not there, we should be thanking God for times of peace. Although sometimes persecution isn't there simply because our testimony is absent, and that may be an invitation to reconsider how we might better share the hope of Jesus in our circles.

But second, even if persecution doesn't come to us, we do experience suffering of various kinds. Today, people in developed countries live longer than ever before, but suicide rates are higher. Mental health issues plague us. Suffering finds a way. And those sufferings might be considered opportunities to suffer for Christ if we can rise above them.

And yet seeing the value in suffering for Christ may not be enough to instill confidence in us that we will suffer well. How can we live in the present without being weighed down by the prospect of future failure? Let's hear from Paul in Philippians 1:18-26.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 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. 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. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 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! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 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, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me. (Philippians 1:18-26)

First, note that Paul was able to have certainty because his foundation was sure. We all experience uncertainties of various kinds. Chances are that you've felt unsure about a job, your marriage or your children. You've second-guessed decisions you've made. It would be nice to be able to unpack all of those burdens today – to cast them aside to live a joyful, confident, certain life.

Unfortunately, as much as we might hope otherwise, none those things can ever be certain. And if that's all we put our hope in, we are probably best off lowering our

expectations of marriage, children, work and hobbies to cope. But Paul didn't put all his stock in that. In one of the letter's most famous verses, Paul writes, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Paul lived on the conviction that Christ was not only worthy of his life but a real life lived was all about Christ. He believed this so much that a death that would unite him to Jesus could only be considered gain. When we ask God to take our semi-Christian or Christ-less lives and transform them into Christ-centered lives, we won't have to cope through life because we can hope through it instead.

Even still, uncertainty finds a way into the lives of those who enjoy Jesus as their foundation. *How do I know that I'll stand the test? How do I know that I won't walk away?* There is a good chance that those were questions on Paul's mind as well. Consider verse nineteen with me: "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."

Many have puzzled over what Paul means by his deliverance in verse nineteen. Deliverance from what? Some have guessed that Paul anticipated he'd be released from prison. If we skip to verse twenty-five, that makes good sense: Paul says he believes he'll stay alive in order that he may continue adding to their confidence in Christ. But that skips a very important qualification in verses twenty through twenty-one: "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. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Why would Paul be ashamed over his release from prison? Why would he require courage for that? Why include the thought of magnifying Christ by death if he doesn't consider it possible?

Others have guessed that Paul believed his soul would be *saved*, which is another way that Bibles translate that word. But does Paul believe that some final act is required for him to enter into God's kingdom? Or that salvation is something that results from someone else's prayer? Both thoughts would be inconsistent with his teachings elsewhere. Some have argued that by "salvation" Paul meant spiritual growth. But the situation surrounding his death suggests a more specific request.

Instead of all of that, there's a good chance that Paul hoped for deliverance from the fear or temptation of not being a faithful witness in the face of a possible execution. Denying Christ at that point would have brought him shame; he would have failed to

magnify Jesus by his death. Paul isn't afraid of death. He's concerned about not dying well.

My friend Jen was a hospice nurse for twenty years. This week I asked her what she would say to the idea that death is not going to be painful. She said she would say, "Life is painful. Death will be painful too."

One of the things that stood out the most in our conversation was that "Christians and non-Christians don't necessarily experience death that differently" even though it's not always possible to know what people mean when they say they are Christians. On occasion "some people come in and say that they have no religion and they seem to have peace and be at peace with what is happening." Then on other occasions "when things got really tough," some Christians who tended to be expressive and experience-driven "didn't have anything to lean on."

Paul didn't take the challenges of death for granted. He knew that death was hard. And the prospect of an early death at the hands of his enemies brought with it a temptation to take back anything he said about his faith. But even in death Paul wanted to magnify Christ. He didn't expect a peaceful or painless death. He desired a Christ-magnifying death.

But in the face of uncertainty over what would happen next and how he might respond, he had strong confidence that he would stand the test. Why? Because of the Philippians' "prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ."

That might sound like a foolish thing to say. Today, the expression "thoughts and prayers" has changed from a heartfelt condolence to a negative meme. Part of the outcry makes sense. The public has grown tired of politicians expressing grief over disasters instead of doing something they believe to be in the politicians' control. But the secularization of society is certainly responsible too. Condolences such as "Let's all send...positive energy and healing thoughts" are more widely received even though one would be hard-pressed to prove their practical value. Thoughts that heal? Wouldn't that be something?

But how can we blame anyone for being down on prayer especially when prayer for personal wants and desires has proven unsuccessful for so many? Paul's request for prayer was nothing of the sort. He wasn't praying to be removed from suffering. He wanted to rise above the suffering in order to honor Jesus.

But Paul knew that was a task that was too big for him. That's why Paul could only lean on prayer and the power of the Spirit for such an order. If he was going to prove his faithfulness in the most challenging test of his life, he was going to need God to do it for him. And Paul fully believed he would.

That sounds crazy, right? Paul had asked God to remove some "thorn" from his life before, but God denied his request saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). How could Paul be so confident in this?

The difference between his prayer request in 2 Corinthians and his one to the Philippians is that Paul knew first that being a faithful witness was precisely what God wanted of him and second that God was the one who enabled him to be a faithful witness in the first place. Here is the secret Paul reveals about God at the beginning of the letter that makes this meaningful: "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). In other words, God doesn't like to start something he won't finish. He doesn't begin assembling a one thousand piece jigsaw puzzle only to leave it scattered on the kitchen table until he gets bored of it and puts it away. God brought Paul the courage, vision and strength he needed to be a witness in the beginning, and he would do it in the end. God finishes what he starts.

And through prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit, God can enable us to finish our journeys with confidence too. We don't have to look to our futures in light of our past failures. We don't have to look at potential pain and suffering as insurmountable chasms. We can unburden ourselves from those uncertainties by trusting the God who supplies in our hardest moments. It doesn't require a mountain of faith. It just requires faith. Through the faithful prayers of our friends and our daily reliance on the Spirit, we can be confident that we'll say "yes" where we might otherwise have said "no."

The truth is, that kind of Christ-magnifying life might feel unreachable – something only the so-called saints were worthy of. But when God steps into our lives and when we accept him, he makes us all saints. And he supplies us with the resources to do what's remarkable.

3. THE WEIGHT OF SELF-IMPORTANCE

Philippians 1:27-2:11, 2:19-25, 4:2-3

After giving my life to Jesus, the first church experience I had opened my eyes to the life and energy that could be found in a group of people whole-heartedly seeking after God. I grew up in churches that felt a little stuffy and perhaps insincere at times. The pastor of this new church was full of energy. Even though he was in his fifties, he looked like he was ready to run cross country with the college students. He always wore a grin that stretched from ear to ear.

As I became more acquainted with the church, I eventually met David, who was an elder of the church. David was short and stout. His round face was covered by thick salt and pepper hair, a heavy pair of glasses and a mustache that always covered his lips. The former police sheriff spoke slowly with the fatherly voice of actor Wilford Brimley (the Quaker Oats guy). You couldn't see a smile under that thick mustache, but you could feel his caring eyes taking you in.

I soon learned that the pastor and elder had a close friendship that in many ways served as a foundation for the church. Their relationship kept it strong as they both brought vital gifts to the members and to each other.

But one day after moving away, I returned to visit the church to find out that David wasn't there. And the next time I visited he wasn't there either. His absence could be felt in the room, but everyone acted as though nothing had changed. So after some time, I found him and asked if we could get together. David explained that he and the pastor had a disagreement over the Sunday service that caused them to split. I couldn't really understand the logic – whatever the decision was, it didn't seem all that important in the greater scheme of things. There was a part of me that hoped David would come back. The church wouldn't be the same in his absence. And it was never the same again.

The early church was no stranger to this sort of thing. In Philippians 4:2-3 the Apostle Paul writes, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have

contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.” We don’t know anything else about Euodia and Syntyche other than what we learn in these two verses. Both appear to be sincere followers of Jesus who were well respected in the church. That word “contend” was a military metaphor suggesting both were brave in sharing the message about Jesus. But for some unstated reason, there is something broken in their relationship prompting Paul to plead with them to “be of the same mind.”

There seems to be an infinite number of things that can divide us. But going through life with a broken relationship is no way to live, especially for those who consider themselves to be a part of God’s family. We were made for healthy connections with other people. In the beginning, God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). As difficult as relationships can be, they give us purpose and meaning. Sharing a meal, a laugh or a memory adds value to our lives. And wholeness in relationships brings wholeness within. Can you imagine happiness and love apart from any human relationship?

The truth is, one of the biggest obstacles to resolving conflicts is a secret weight that we bring into battle: self-importance. Self-importance may not be one of the first things that comes to mind when we think of the spiritual burdens we carry. But it rears its head in all sorts of ways and can especially come alive in the midst of conflict.

Self-importance shows up when our goals become more important than someone else’s. We all have a deep drive within us to achieve or obtain what we want. Self-importance causes us to exaggerate our needs and overlook the feelings of other people when the two conflict. And conversation breaks down as a result.

Self-importance is just as likely to cause conflicts as it is to keep them going. Psychologists observe an interesting phenomenon in humans that contributes to this. They say that we all have an innate desire to preserve a distinct identity. And that identity is threatened the most by people who are nearest in resemblance. They call this “the narcissism of minor difference.” This desire to distinguish ourselves explains in part why there is so much fuel in cross-town rivalries. It explains the passion behind brand-identification. I can still picture some of the country kids in high school defending their picks of Ford or Chevy with fervor. In their article entitled “The Narcissism of Minor Differences,” two researchers noted that this desire for distinct identity could result in a tendency to define oneself negatively by what one isn’t and

focus on trivialities over fundamentals. They go on to say, “To see one’s neighbors reflect and mirror oneself too much threatens a person’s unique sense of self and superiority...To alleviate this injury to one’s ego, one downplays their similarities with others and emphasizes their divergences — which can be amplified into seemingly unbridgeable rifts.”² We intuitively perceive sameness to be a threat to our existence, so we intensify differences to ease our fractured egos and mask our insecurities. Our sense of self becomes so important that instead of finding common ground, we fight it.

If self-importance is driving unhealthy conflict and keeping it alive, how can we take this weight and cast it aside? The Apostle Paul pleaded with Euodia and Syntyche to have the same mind. But how can individuals weighed down by this unseen burden put aside their interests and their fears of losing their identity?

Fortunately, Paul already told Euodia and Syntyche how they might have the same mind when he addressed the entire church at Philippi just a couple of chapters earlier. Starting in Philippians 1:27, Paul writes:

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

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, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

² McKay, Brett, and Kate McKay. “The Narcissism of Minor Differences.” *The Art of Manliness*, 27 May 2018, <https://www.artofmanliness.com/articles/the-narcissism-of-minor-differences/>.

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 1:27-2:11)

Paul begins by encouraging his readers to conduct themselves in a manner that is worthy of the message about Jesus—and he tells them that that conduct is standing firm in *one spirit* and striving *together*. That word translated “striving together” is the one he later uses to describe how Euodia and Syntyche worked with him.

Paul reiterates that same idea in chapter two, verse two by inviting them to complete his joy by being like-minded, the same thing he urges Euodia and Syntyche to do in chapter four. He then goes on to tell them how to do so positively: “having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.” And then he tells them what to avoid: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

What follows about Jesus emptying himself serves as a model for what this looks like. Jesus “humbled himself” greatly. Although he was in the form of God, he took on the form of a slave and willingly suffered the most shameful death possible.

Paul begins his plea with an invitation to come together. He concludes it with a call to abandon selfish-ambition, vanity, the belief that we are better than others and the pursuit of our own interests over the interests of others. And he gives us Jesus as a model.

This section of Paul’s letter is dense. There is a lot of heavy theological material that has puzzled Christian thinkers for centuries especially about the divinity and humanity of Jesus. You may want to dive into some deeper discussions about that in your life group. But Paul didn’t share these big ideas for his readers to puzzle over theological nuance – he shared them so they would know how to live. What’s Paul’s bottom line?

We can come together by practicing something demonstrated by Jesus better than anyone else: humility.

Not only is humility a divine principle – it’s radical. It is completely counterintuitive to natural human thought and feeling. Hear Paul’s words again: “in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

A definition of biblical humility is elusive. Some might look to Romans 12:3 for help: “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.” Based on this, it has been said that humility is simply having an honest assessment of oneself – neither overly inflated nor overly diminished. But what if someone just happens to be very gifted, intelligent or handsome? Isn’t it possible that a higher view of oneself could be in some ways an honest view of oneself?

Paul’s words in Philippians 2 are more helpful. There Paul tells his readers of two actions that are in conformity with humility: valuing (as the NIV translates the word) or *considering* others to be more important and *looking* out for the interests of others over the interests of ourselves. That word “consider” is one of Paul’s favorite words in the book of Philippians. It appears more in this letter than all of his other letters combined. It shows up just a few verses later when he says that Jesus “did not *consider* equality with God something to be used for his own advantage.” It’s a thinking word that invites us to process how we view people differently. “Looking” is more of an active word that calls us to pay close attention to people’s needs. You could say that humility thinks differently and looks differently. Or more specifically, it thinks outwardly and looks outwardly.

Some of you might struggle with a diminished sense of self-worth. Perhaps you wonder how all of that fits with abandoning self-importance. C. S. Lewis said, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less.” Considering someone to be more important and putting their interests before your own doesn’t require us to lower our view of ourselves. It requires us to increase our view of others.

But chances are some of you have reservations. Doesn’t this open the door for manipulation or abuse? God did not create you to be a doormat. He created you to

flourish. Putting other people first is not yielding to every person's whim. It's recognizing real needs and putting real needs before your own. It's a poor mother making sure her children have something to eat before she does. It's a hiker caught in a surprise snowstorm lending a fellow adventurer his jacket. It's helping a stranger change a tire when you were on your way to see a friend. This kind of life costs us, but it does not feed into the false needs of those with selfish ambitions.

We can take the weight of self-importance that drives our conflicts and cast it aside by putting on humility instead. God invites us to do that by changing our thought patterns and shifting our focus. We can find release from this invisible burden that strains our relationships and weighs down our souls by magnifying the value of other people in our hearts and minds. And we can do this by creating space in our routines and schedules to meet the needs of those God created in his image as opportunities arise.

Chances are that you're like me and you get caught up in building your own identity, securing your own future and working for better days. As good and important as all of those things can be, can you imagine what it would feel like to be emotionally unburdened from those things? Can you imagine what it would be like to be freer to build relationships with people that aren't simply based on what they can do for you but on how you might add value to their lives instead? A funny thing happens when our own self-importance starts to diminish. Trivial differences become trivial again. We find it easier to lose an argument and keep a friend. We discover it's possible to cherish someone we have a difference of opinion with.

This is the last we hear about the church at Philippi. There's a chance that Euodia and Syntyche juggled church attendance for a while. Maybe when Euodia was there, Syntyche decided to stay away. It's surely possible that one of them decided not to play that game anymore and stopped going together. That kind of thing happens all the time. But maybe, just maybe, one night as the church huddled together around Paul's letter, one of them heard Paul's words about coming together, about being humble and about their savior Jesus who abandoned every right and position he had. Maybe some of the words she said previously about being right in the matter came back to her and suddenly left a sour taste in her mouth. Perhaps, for a moment she was able to see her friend's point of view even if she disagreed. And it's even possible that after one of the disciples finished reading the letter, she felt a burden lift from her

soul and decided to go out that night and knock on her friend's door to try to work things out again.

4. THE WEIGHT OF RELIGION

Philippians 2:13, 3:2-4:1

The idea of God is never quite enough for those who determine that he exists. If life is indeed transcendent and if God is real, there must be some purpose we were made to live out. Have you ever caught a glimpse of a multicolored sunset, looked across a mighty canyon or peered into the depths of space and sensed an inward tug? Or have you considered the love you've felt for a child or the kindness of a stranger and longed to experience more fully the source of all of that? The truth of God doesn't just make us curious. It invokes in us a desire to connect to something more.

The problem is and always has been religion. That might sound like a strange thing to say in a conversation about connecting with God. Isn't that what religion is all about? But one of the fundamental premises of religion is that people can somehow bridge the gap between mankind and God by exerting effort, performing special ceremonies and doing certain religious duties. All of that makes what we consider transcendent not that transcendent at all. A human couldn't craft a divine encounter any more than a bear could build a skyscraper. Religion is a substitution for what we could never experience on our own.

The Bible does point to a good kind of religion – a religion that cares for those in distress (1 Timothy 5:4; James 1:27). That's not the kind of religion we're talking about here.

It's the other kind of religion that healthy believing people would want to stay away from. But it seems that religion finds its way to the best of us. We might initially recognize it for what it is when it peaks its head around the corner. But eventually, we come to accept it. Not only that, we allow it to multiply so that it replaces what was good and true with what's deceptive and hollow. And we slowly starve ourselves spiritually even though we think we're eating. Our lives might look full on the outside, but we're empty within.

How can we cast aside the weight of religion in order to enjoy an authentic relationship with God? In a moment we'll reflect on Paul's personal testimony to the

church at Philippi for the answer. But before going there, let's consider how the problem of religion holds us back.

Jen Lee was raised with two religions. Her family was evangelical Christian and they also put their hope in Mary Kay.

Jen resisted Mary Kay at first. But a little makeup lured her in.

Their business plan looked full-proof on paper. If you got one friend to book a Mary Kay party, you just needed to get two more people from that party to host their own. But Jen could never get that to work. The other way to reach out was to strike up conversations with strangers and use what was called "warm chatter." She would spend time at Target, but she wasn't shopping. She was hunting people that looked friendly and approachable. She would follow them until they could be alone in an aisle and with a big smile say, "Excuse me, could I ask your opinion about this?" A free sample came after that, with a follow-up call and an invite to host a party.

Jen was also involved in a young, hip church populated with twenty-somethings. She was quickly invited into the higher levels of leadership there. She always had this picture that the meetings would be "soul full" events, but she was alarmed to learn that they were just meetings about branding, marketing and the church's next advertising campaign. The church world and the Mary Kay world began to look a lot more alike. And Jen eventually abandoned both.

There is nothing wrong with a church being present in the community and letting that community know who it is. And for those of us who believe that Jesus brings life, there is no better gift to share.

But Jen's experience is common. Some believers substitute spiritual connection with marketing campaigns. Others replace spiritual living with ceremony. And still others forgo spiritual power in favor of self-reliance and religious duties.

How can we blame them? The most natural thing to do when our hearts are empty is to fill them with what we know. And there's a part of all of us that is drawn to those things. But religion cannot occupy the same place as a real connection to God. If we want to cast the weight of religion aside and enjoy a connection with the divine, we have to know what true connection is so we can carefully distinguish between the two.

Consider Paul's words to the church at Philippi starting in chapter three, verse two:

Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. (Philippians 3:2-6)

Paul was born a Jew, he was raised a Jew and he was trained in the most strict Jewish sect – the Pharisees. According to those standards, Paul claimed that he was at the top of the game. Jews were circumcised on the eighth day receiving a male identity marker that began during the time of Abraham, the father of all Israelites. He wasn't a Jew by conversion – he was from the very people of Israel, a Benjamite. And because he was a Pharisee, he didn't just follow the law in general, he prescribed to its very letter.

The first disciples considered themselves Jews. The thought that Christianity would have arisen from Judaism as something distinct would have surprised them – at least initially. But even while Jesus walked the earth, many Jews pushed against his claim to be the long-awaited Messiah and God. They felt like the second claim especially was blasphemous because it didn't fit their understanding of God. And they didn't like some of the things Jesus was teaching either – he challenged their sincerity, he questioned some of their rituals and he opened the door far too wide to non-Jewish people.

The split between Christianity and Judaism only widened when God revealed to the church that Gentiles didn't have to be circumcised to be a part of God's family. Some who initially found themselves on the non-Christian side of the split like Paul considered it their duty to discipline and bring God's judgment on their errant brothers and sisters. At the time, Paul thought of it as an act of devotion.

But Jesus flipped Paul. On a trip to persecute Christians, he had a vision of Jesus that made him a Christ-follower. And as a part of that, Paul also came to a much different understanding of devotion.

Look again at Paul's words. In a sharp warning to avoid religious teaching, he says, "Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh" (Phil 3:2).

Paul's words are not an aggressive attack on a passive religious group. These people were slipping false ideas into the church and sending Christians to jail for no good reason. Paul calls them "mutilators of the flesh" and distinguishes them from the church who he calls "the circumcision." Paul believed that the only circumcision that had value for the church was the metaphorical cutting of evil from the heart (Jeremiah 4:4) not a literal cutting of the flesh from the body.

But if Paul is concerned about substituting ritual for true obedience to God, he is even more concerned with how a person might accomplish it. Those who live sincere transcendent lives – "the circumcision," Paul calls them – are characterized in three ways. First, they worship by the Spirit. The translation we just read says they "serve" by the Spirit, but the word is probably best translated "worship" because it was used in ancient religious settings where people were attempting to form some connection with the divine.

What's it mean when Paul says that they "worship by the Spirit"? The Spirit is the third person of the Trinity – somehow God himself – separate in person but identical in nature. He is the member of the Trinity that mysteriously comes to live inside a Christian when they accept Jesus. And he empowers Christians to do things they might not otherwise do. Paul is saying that the only way we can connect with God is by first having God connect with us.

The next two things he says reinforce this. Those who live sincere transcendent lives "boast in Christ Jesus and...put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil 3:3). Christ is the means by which we connect to God. By his death, all people have the potential of gaining a new relationship with God because his death paid for our sins and paved the way for the Holy Spirit to come. We understand Christ to be God also – the second person of the Trinity. So we connect with God by first having God connect with us. And we put no confidence in the flesh. In other words, we don't trust ourselves to conjure the desire or effort it takes to build that connection. It begins and ends with God.

This is perhaps one of the most unique things about Christianity. Christianity is for realists. It doesn't overlook the evil of the world or the sin in our own lives. It doesn't pretend that we can make ourselves acceptable to God with the spirit of *The Little Engine that Could*. Nor does it offer up a watered-down version of God. Instead, it

gives us hope in God coming down – not simply to dwell in our midst but to dwell in our hearts and empower us to live the kind of lives that we never could alone.

Reconsider Paul’s words from the previous chapter: “it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil 2:13). That word “will” appears sixty-one times in Paul’s letters and is translated “want” or “desire” in almost all of them. “Want” brings a little more clarity to what Paul is saying here. God works in you to *want* and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

That might be one of the most liberating statements in all of Scripture. Chances are that you have done a lot of things in your life that you didn’t want to do. You probably do a lot of those every day. God wants us to do good even when we don’t want to do it. He works in us to enable us to do those things. But he doesn’t stop there. God also works in us to change our desires so that we might not only *do* the thing but *love* the thing we’re doing. And that, my friends, is a picture of a whole person: someone doing the good that they desire. There is complete harmony in body and spirit.

Paul gives his readers a glimpse into his past résumé to tell them, *I used to be a person that worked hard and believed that I had everything within me that it would take to connect with God. And I believed I had arrived. But now, that’s no longer the case. The only way I can form a true connection to God is by allowing him to build that connection within me. Anything else isn’t good enough.* A true connection to God is trust in a power that changes us.

But that’s not all. Paul continues:

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings...(Philippians 3:7-10a)

That’s a powerful statement. Whatever Paul considered “gain” before, he considers a loss. In fact, in comparison to what he has now, Paul considers “everything” not only a loss but garbage or “dung” as that word can be translated.

What is this thing of surpassing value and worth to Paul? Paul outlines it step by step. It's first that he might "gain and be found in" Christ. Those are two sides of the same coin. He's talking about a person's introduction to Christ that comes about by trusting.

An introduction like that can't happen naturally because our moral makeup is initially so different from God's. But by the same means that God enables us to change, he makes it possible to approach him forgiven with no record of guilt. Our moral makeup may not have entirely changed, but when we approach God he sees us differently. He sees us as righteous not because of the effort we exerted to become something different but because of the clean slate he gave us when we believed.

And that introduction leads to something even better: "to know Christ, the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings." This is a person's growing connection to Christ. The word "know" is intimate, personal and experiential. Paul didn't just look for head knowledge of Jesus, his resurrection power and participation in his sufferings – he wanted to connect with Jesus and go through some of what Jesus did. He wasn't satisfied with a God who winds up the clock of our existence and steps far away to watch it tick from a distance. Religion talks about God as one talks about a celebrity. We read about them and hear about them. We share our opinions about them. Sometimes the thought of them invokes real passions one way or the other. And the more we adore them, the more it feels like we know them. But the truth is most of what we have is a shadow. It's not personal. It's not felt in the same way that one feels when a friend calls their name or a co-worker shares a kind word. It's empty. A true connection to God is someone experienced.

Perhaps you've met someone the world thinks is important – some famous actress, a well-known politician or maybe some business mogul. As much as some might hate to admit it, those moments leave an impact on us. Most of us can remember the details of the memory because of the emotions it invoked in us – surprise, excitement and awe. Can you imagine for a moment instead of just experiencing God as a concept, you felt him in your presence like a deep breath in your lungs or warmth across your shoulders? What if you coupled that with what you knew about Jesus from the Scriptures – his kindness, his courage, his grace, his gentleness, his boldness, his humility? Can you see him taking you in with strong affectionate eyes?

The imagination and the heart can be a dangerous place – it can create what we want to see and experience instead of what is really there. And yet the imagination when paired with a faithful reading of the Bible and a dependence on the Holy Spirit is not a door that's closed to God. We can experience God even now and find peace, joy, healing and wholeness.

But Paul is not done even yet! He concludes his thought with this:

...becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10b-11)

This English translation might be misunderstood because Paul is not saying that his goal is to become like Jesus. His goal is to be “conformed to his death” instead. What does that mean? Earlier we learned that Paul thought it possible that he would die in prison, and if so, he wanted to die the kind of death that would magnify Jesus (1:19-21). A little bit later in chapter two, Paul talks about the kind of death that Jesus had. “He humbled himself,” Paul says, “by becoming obedient to death” (2:8). This was a death Jesus willingly accepted to magnify God. And as a result, he was “exalted” by God (2:9). The parallel to Philippians 3:10-11 is striking and perhaps gives us insight into what Paul was saying. He wanted the death he anticipated to be an act of humility that made Christ look good. And he hoped that as a result, God would raise him from the dead too.

At the end of chapter three, Paul closes with this: “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” Citizenship was a big deal to the city of Philippi. When Octavian ran through Mark Antony’s forces, the city of Philippi was established as a military colony that had special privileges because of that. That word “citizenship” would have resonated with this church in particular. They believed that Jesus was coming back. But when he came back he was going to bring something with him – all the privileges of heaven that they had only tasted on earth. That included a new body. It included a restored and good world under the rule of Jesus. That citizenship was not there yet. Rights in their world were theirs to forsake, not claim. But it was coming. A true connection to God is something hoped for.

A true connection with God is something hoped for, someone experienced and trust in a power that changes. Unfortunately, religion is always competing, and the two

cannot peaceably coexist. The latter will always attempt to choke out the former. And it is a heavy burden that we were not designed to bear. It requires so much of us to maintain our images, to go through the motions and to constantly spin our wheels as we chant, “I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.” But God has something better for us when we cast all that aside and say, “I know I can’t, but I believe he can, that he’s here and that he will.”

I’d like to believe that after the Philippians heard this message, they showed religion the door. I imagine that it was like a major weight had been lifted from their shoulders – a weight they didn’t know they were carrying for so long. And perhaps something lighter and brighter filled that empty space – a sense of God’s presence and his love, the feeling of joy knowing that everything didn’t rest on them, a little energy bubbling up in their hearts to feel and do some good and a vibrant hope that tomorrow held something special for them.

God exists, and our lives matter because of it. There’s a purpose to all this. There’s meaning. But what’s perhaps even more profound is that our big God has opened the door to touch him and to experience something more. God has bridged the gap, and all he asks us to do is receive him.

5. THE WEIGHT OF WORRY

Philippians 4:6-19

I imagine that “Sara” looked forward to her wedding day with the same anticipation as anyone else. The venue was booked, the invites were out and she’d found the perfect dress for that day.

But throughout the entire engagement, something didn’t sit quite right. It wasn’t him. He was perfect. It was her. People say that all the time, and they mean something else by it. But she meant it honestly.

Several years before she had been diagnosed with a life-shortening genetic disease. Sara’s days were numbered. The thought of marrying her fiancé only to die shortly after became too much.

Two months before the wedding, she called it off. But in a sad, ironic twist, she ended up outliving the man that would have been her husband.

Some people fear a potential future so much that they’ll do anything to avoid it – even sacrificing happiness in the present.

Whatever the tension, big or small, worry has a way of bringing disorder to our private worlds and holding us back from enjoying life in the present.

No person consciously invites worry in. It’s like a home invasion. Surely, if anyone had a choice in the matter, they’d prefer to live a life unburdened from the weight of worry. Can you imagine what it would be like to live fully in the present without always having an anxious eye gazing ahead? What would it be like to be free from the indecision that comes from the fear of a thousand different outcomes?

The church at Philippi lived in tense times and had plenty of reasons to worry themselves. They watched from afar as the Romans threw their mentor and leader in prison with threats to execute him. They watched their resources drain as they looked for ways to support him. And they surely wondered when the same persecution that fell upon Paul would reach them.

Chances are that you'd abandon the weight of worry if you could, but in the moment it just doesn't feel like you can. The good news is that God has provided a way forward. He wants us to live an unburdened life even in the midst of so many unknowns. And he hasn't left us without the power and perspective to do so.

Consider with me some of Paul's last words in his letter to the Philippians. In Philippians 4:6-9, he writes:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:6-9)

There is something special about peace – especially the inner kind that soothes the heart and brings order to the mind. Paul calls it the peace of God “which transcends all understanding.” It's not something we can make sense of or replicate. And it probably looks a little foolish to outsiders because it is experienced even when circumstances don't justify it.

Perhaps that kind of peace has looked a little foolish to you. Worry can make sense especially when it produces caution and safety. It gives us the feeling of control and fosters a belief that we can protect ourselves from the worst. Focusing on the risks could help us eliminate them, we think. But the reality is that worrying makes the present miserable and can keep us from taking positive steps toward the future.

Wouldn't it be nice if worry was a switch that we could just turn off so that we could get on with making the best out of the time we have? But Paul implies that worry doesn't come from within. It's something that attacks you from the outside. That's why he presents the transcendent peace of God as something that protects. Paul presents peace as a guard choosing a term that's used when troops position themselves at the city gate to hold back their enemy forces. The heart and mind are potential war zones. But we can have God's peace to protect it by the power of Christ Jesus, and Paul tells us how: pray with thanksgiving, reflect on what's good and follow his example.

There are two ways that these actions protect. First, in praying with thanksgiving and reflecting on what is good, the Christian reinforces the barrier against anxious thoughts. Paul is not making a plea for the power of positive thinking. His request is not a denial of evil in the world. Rather, by focusing the mind on the good that God has given, we can better remember that he does provide even if it's not always in ways we'd imagine or prefer.

Second, in following Paul's example of Christian mission and conduct we ensure that the devil doesn't break through our defenses and stir us up against God. What good is the peace *of* God if we don't have peace *with* God? Perhaps the worst prospect of facing some trial is facing it alone. Being confident that all is right with God enables us to invite God into the battle against worry. It gives us courage knowing that someone is on our side.

We can count on God to give us a guard against worry when we pray with thanksgiving, reflect on what's good and live a life of good Christian conduct. But can we count on God to protect us from the *trials* we worry about? And how can we prevent worry from leveraging our past hurts and disappointments if he doesn't?

One version of the Bible translates Philippians 4:19 this way: "my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (NIV, 1984). That would appear to settle the matter. If safety isn't a basic need, there's not much else that could rightly be considered one. According to this verse, God seems to have a storehouse available for needs such as this. And Paul seemed to think that the Christians in Philippi could count on God to come through. Maybe he wouldn't fulfill their every desire. Perhaps God wouldn't grant them the promotion one of them had hoped for. Maybe he wouldn't provide another one with a bigger home. But God would not stop providing for their basic needs... or so it seems.

Yet life is more complicated than that. Christians suffer and die in ways that raise questions about God's unconditional provision in this life. Throughout history, they have starved, drowned and died as a result of strokes, infections or illnesses. Hearing their stories brings an icy tremor to our hearts forming a solid foundation for fear. Their suffering brings up worries deep within us about the security of our families, the safety of a relationship or the prospect of personal pain.

God has given all of us so much to be thankful for today. But the truth is, sometimes our worries about the future become realities. Peace can become a little harder to

juggle when disappointment comes knocking. In all Paul's talk about peace, he never guaranteed his readers that God would provide. In fact, what follows may indicate that he sometimes doesn't. Paul writes this:

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:10-13)

"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty." There were times when Paul feasted, he was warm and he had a place to lay his head. And there were also times he went without a meal, was beaten without adequate medical help and had to endure sleepless nights (2 Corinthians 6:5). "To be in need" means that God did not provide for his need.

But even in this, Paul claims that he "learned the secret of being content in any and every situation." The tragedy of that claim is that he never directly tells us what that secret is. Perhaps it's implied when he says he can do all things "through him" in verse 13. But that's a fairly general statement.

And yet, the secret might be revealed as Paul concludes. He writes:

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:14-19)

There's that verse we brought up earlier. An older version translated it as follows: "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (NIV, 1984).

But notice that the updated version makes one minor change. “The riches of his glory” (NIV, 2011) has replaced “his glorious riches.” That might seem like a trivial difference, but it’s actually not. After researching the Greek phrase *en doxa* (rendered “in glory”), the translators learned that the phrase doesn’t modify nouns like “riches.” Instead, it connects to verbs and told readers more information about those verbs like “how,” “when” or “where” an action would take place. Notice how Paul uses the exact same phrase in another one of his letters: “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him *in glory*” (Colossians 3:4). In the case of Philippians 4:19, Paul probably also included the phrase “in his glory” to tell his readers “where.” Where will God meet all the church’s needs? In his glory – that is, at the arrival of Jesus Christ.

That clarification is important because God does not, in fact, promise that we’ll never go hungry or that we’ll never have sleepless nights on this earth. That alone might be cause for worry, but God invites us to shift our focus to a time when all of those needs will be met. Unlike many televangelists today, Paul does not guarantee that God will multiply the riches of those who gave to his ministry on this earth. But he does promise that God will meet all their needs in the next world in the same way they sacrificed to meet the needs of others in this one.

The world will always look at a perspective like that as foolish.

John Chau was 26 when he first made contact with the Sentinelese, an uncontacted hunter-gatherer tribe off the coast of India. “My name is John. I love you, and Jesus loves you,” he yelled from his kayak as he first made contact. John had felt a specific calling to become the first missionary to the Sentinelese despite the known dangers he faced. After years of preparation, he had finally arrived.

Chau offered a tuna to the tribesmen, but they began loading arrows onto their bowstrings. Chau began paddling back to the boat with all his might. An arrow hit him, but it was stopped by his waterproof Bible.

Chau made it back to the boat, but all of his resources had been abandoned on the island. He wrote in his journal: “It’s weird—actually no, it’s natural: I’m scared. There, I said it...I DON’T WANT to Die! Would it be wiser to leave and let someone else continue?” John was left with a difficult decision. Would he go back and continue the work he felt God wanted him to do?

Somewhere along the way, John gained the courage to go back. He wrote in his journal, “Perfect LOVE casts out fear. LORD Jesus, fill me with Your perfect love for these people!” But his newfound courage didn’t preclude the possibility of a violent end to his mission. In one of the letters he wrote to be taken to his friends, he wrote: “I think I might die...I’ll see you again, bro—and remember, the first one to heaven wins.”

Chau’s next encounter with the Sentinelese would be his last. Fishermen spotted his body from the shore being dragged by the tribesmen.³

It was an act of love that wasn’t received – a seemingly senseless sacrifice that could justify the burden of worry we carry. But Chau’s ultimate choice came down not simply to what he might gain in this encounter but what he might gain in the life that is next.

One of my teachers said that “courage is not the absence of fear but seeing something greater beyond it.” If we hope for another world and live in this world like we are preparing for the next, it’s going to look foolish to those who can’t imagine anything beyond the grave.

But what if there was something more? What if everything the Bible said about life beyond was true? What if there really was a place where every need was met and where no tears were shed? Wouldn’t that be worth putting our hope in?

We can cast aside the weight of worry by shifting our focus to the present good in prayer, by staying connected to God through our obedience and by keeping a hopeful eye on the life beyond. God had better things for the Philippians. He wanted them to enjoy the moment in front of them, treasure the relationships they had and make decisions in light of the life to come.

And God has better things for us. Can you imagine what it would be like to live a life full of purpose without having to control the outcome? Can you picture what it would be like to have a heart overflowing with peace? And is it possible that God could enable you to be truly content no matter what need comes your way?

³ Clark, Doug Bock. “The American Missionary and the Uncontacted Tribe.” GQ, GQ, 27 Aug. 2019, <https://www.gq.com/story/john-chau-missionary-and-uncontacted-tribe>.

There is a peace that can be had that permeates the Christian life and climaxes when Jesus comes again. It's not a peace that promises no suffering or trial. But it is a peace that satisfies the soul and gives us energy to face the day. It's within reach. And it has the power to change the moments we struggle and the weeks that weigh us down as we anticipate the day when they'll be washed away.

CONCLUSION

There are all sorts of ways someone can become a social media legend today. They most often involve doing or capturing something wild or big. But an acquaintance of mine, Caleb, became a local social media celebrity for doing something small.

Caleb rented a room from a friend of mine who owned a beautiful home on the edge of town. The home overlooked rolling hills to the west and had a beautifully fenced pasture to the east where horses onetime roamed. I imagine that Caleb's room overlooked that pasture as he dreamed of the day where he would no longer have to pay rent. It didn't take him long to take action on that dream. With his friend's permission, he pulled the frame of a trailer into that empty pasture and started construction ... on his tiny house.

We can't help but look at the phenomena of tiny houses and smile, like when we look at someone's children and see a miniature, cuter version of their parents. It's charming and quaint. Most of us would never entertain the idea of it. It's a novelty – not something for the average person. At least that's what we tell ourselves.

But I imagine that a lot of the attention the tiny house movement has received has come with a little longing and secret jealousy. Wouldn't it be nice to be unburdened from all the stuff we think we need? What would be possible if we didn't have to pay rent or a hefty mortgage? How would it feel to be able to just pick up and go?

You may have no plans to shrink your estate, but perhaps it's time to cast aside some of the invisible burdens your soul bears and enjoy a little more freedom wherever you go. Maybe it's time to put your focus on God so that your relationships won't be held back by the way people respond to you. Perhaps you're ready to sort through all the uncertainties about your faith and trust God to strengthen you and prepare you for the toughest times. There's a chance that you're done carrying the burden of trivial conflicts and you're prepared to take a step toward better relationships with humility. Maybe God has shown you the weight of religion and you're feeling the invitation to move into his presence instead. And it's possible that you're ready to ride into joyful vistas by embracing the good God has provided and keeping an expectant eye on the life to come.

We all bear weights that God never created us to carry. But we don't have to carry them anymore. God is inviting us to unpack our burdens and become people who release others from our expectations and pay attention to those around us. He is calling us to become people who walk with confidence and whose connection with the living God frees us from fear and fills us with hope. Can you see it? The door is open. And God is ready to do something amazing in you.

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