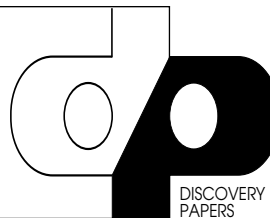


FINDING ASSURANCE IN THE LORD

SERIES: JESUS, OUR JOY



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Philippians 1:1-11
First Message
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I was fascinated by the story of a man named Bob Edens. For fifty-one years, Bob was blind. His world was a black hall filled only with sounds and smells. He felt his way through five decades of darkness. Then one day a skilled surgeon performed a complicated operation on his eyes, and for the first time Bob Edens received sight. As you can imagine, he was overwhelmed. Listen to his words:

I would never have dreamed that yellow is so...yellow. I don't have the words. I am amazed by yellow. But red is my favorite color. I just can't believe red...I can see the shape of the moon—and I like nothing better than seeing a jet plane flying across the sky, leaving a vapor trail. And of course, sunrises and sunsets. And at night I look at the stars in the sky...you could never know how wonderful everything is.

He is correct. Those of us who have lived with vision cannot know how wonderful it is to be given sight for the first time.

But Bob Edens is not the only person who has spent a lifetime without seeing the things around him. Many people suffer from some form of blindness. We can be within reach of something for a lifetime, but unless we take time to notice it, it does not become a part of our lives. Someone may have witnessed a thousand rainbows without ever seeing the grandeur of one. He can live near a garden and fail to see the splendor of a single flower. A man can spend a lifetime with a woman and never pause to look into her soul.

My friends, a person can be all that goodness calls him to be and still never see the Author of life. Being honest, moral or even religious does not necessarily mean that we will see God. You may see what others have seen or hear what others have said about him, but until you see him for yourself, you have only caught hazy visions in shades of grey, never in color. Max Lucado in *God Came Near* writes:

Christianity, in its purest form,
is nothing more than seeing Jesus.
To see His majesty and to imitate him,
That is the sum of Christianity.
Have you caught a glimpse of his majesty?

For the next eight weeks, we will focus on the book of Philippians which will give us a glimpse of Jesus and will help us live life focused upon him. My prayer in this study is that the Divine Surgeon will use this book as a delicate surgical tool to restore your sight. In his hands, your blurry vision can become focused and your darkness will be dispersed. Your view of Christ will change from the vision of a wavy figure in a desert mirage to the touchable face of an intimate friend.

This same miracle occurred to the author of this book, Paul, on the dusty road to Damascus. The Lord Jesus appeared to him and allowed him to see his own blindness in a graphic way. Then he gave him a glimpse of his majesty. From that day forward, Paul was unable to focus on anything else. In this epistle, Paul desires to share this joy of living in Christ with his beloved friends in Philippi.

Paul wrote this letter from Rome while he was awaiting the results of his trial. Having been charged in Jerusalem, he had

appealed to Caesar as a Roman citizen and had been sent to Rome. For two years he was under house arrest which meant people were free to visit him, but he was not free to come and go for he was chained to a Roman soldier. Evidently, at this time, he was still awaiting the Emperor's decision from which there would be no appeal.

Despite his difficult circumstances, Paul's attitude throughout the book is one of joy, confidence and triumph. The secret to his attitude is the theme of this short letter. Although there are other threads woven throughout the book, the uniting factor is not a situation or an event but the person of Jesus Christ. There are around fifty references to Jesus Christ in these four chapters—seventeen in the first chapter alone.

Paul had learned what it meant to be in Christ. In Christ, we are secure and have everything we need; the peace of God patrols and guards our hearts, and his riches are laid open to meet our needs. In Christ, we become new people with new feelings. In Christ, we have a new way of looking at life, seeing his sovereign hand in all things.

Paul had founded this church over ten years before. The remarkable yet humble beginning of this church is recorded in Acts 16. The city of Philippi was located on the Western shore of the Aegean Sea in ancient Macedonia which is a province of modern Greece. In the opening verses of the book, we will see Paul's warm affection for the believers in Philippi. Although it has been over ten years since he first came to them, in many ways he had never left. He had carried them in his heart, and his memory moved him to pray.

In Christ, we have a new way of looking at life

In the first eleven verses of Philippians, we will draw help for our own lives. The paragraph begins with a brief introduction which will give us insight into our identity in Christ. Then there will be a strong word of affirmation which will give us insight into our own security, and finally he will say a powerful prayer which will help us evaluate our own maturity. Let us begin by looking at verses 1 and 2 of this introduction.

I. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION: INSIGHT INTO OUR IDENTITY 1:1-2

**Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus,
to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi,
including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you
and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus
Christ.**

This is a typical introduction to a first century correspondence. Any letter written during that time would have followed the same formula of sender, recipient, and word of greeting. However, there are two observations Paul makes about us which will give us insight into our own identity:

A. We have a unique role—We are saints

There is much confusion surrounding the term translated “saint” or “holy” (in the adjective form). Before I became a Christian, my image of a holy person or saint conjured up some emaciated person who looked as though he had been weaned on a dill pickle—a good frontispiece for the Book of Lamentations.

But this is not the Biblical concept of a saint. The word carries the connotation of being “separate” or “apart.” It conveys the idea of “belonging to a different order of things,” or “living in a different sphere.” Therefore, it is the Bible’s special word for describing God. “Holy” is the most intimate term for describing the divine nature. This word is also used throughout the Old Testament to describe sacred objects which are set apart. When Paul uses this same idea with regard to Christians, he is emphasizing the fact that we have been given God’s divine nature and have been set apart for a special purpose.

It would have been easy for Paul to address his letter merely to the Philippians, but this would not have suited his purpose. He was not concerned with who they were physically or politically, but with who they were by grace and in the sight of God. Politically, they were Philippians, which was no small honor, but grace had made them partakers of the divine nature, conferring on them the honor above all honors. The holy God gave them his title and his character when he called them saints.

Understanding our identity is crucial to our character development. Having worked with high school students most of my life, I am convinced that their understanding of their own identity enhances their ability to achieve greatness. We need to know who we are before we can act correctly. In *Bringing Out the Best in People*, Alan Loy McGinnis writes:

People need an atmosphere in which they can specialize, hone their skills, and discover their distinctiveness. The biographies of the great are sprinkled with accounts of how some teacher or some kindly employer looked closely enough to see a spark no one else saw and for periods, at least, believed in their ability to perfect that gift when no one else did. The Taft family...was evidently good at pushing their children to cut their own swath and to find a specialty of which to be proud. When Martha Taft was in elementary school in Cincinnati she was asked to introduce herself. She said, “My name is Martha Bowers Taft. My great-grandfather was president of the United States. My grandfather was United States senator. My daddy is Ambassador to Ireland. And I am a Brownie.”

We are saints. We are God’s chosen possession, designed to demonstrate his glory in this world. There is no higher honor in all of history.

There is a second point to be noticed in the introduction.

B. We have a humble role—We are servants

Within the local church there was fellowship (“all the saints”) and leadership (“the bishops and the deacons”). However, the leadership was not an imposition upon the fellowship but an extension of it. For the saints were not “under” but “with” or “in company with” the bishops.

That one word “with” gives us great insight into how leadership is to be exercised. Often those who hold positions of leadership in churches want to dominate those who are in their charge. They want to be “over” them or at least go “before” them in terms of prestige and honor. But this is not how Christian leadership ought to be practiced. Paul says the leaders are to work with the rest of the believers. Peter expressed the same idea

when he exhorted the elders: “Shepherd the flock of God *among you*.”

Notice also that Paul even subordinates his own position of apostleship by referring to himself as a servant. Maybe that seems strange to you. Perhaps, you might have expected to read “Saint Paul to the servants” not “Servant Paul to the saints.” This understanding is critical in the life of the body. The saints must be servants.

Unless we understand that we are servants, slaves of Jesus Christ, then we will not understand what it means to be a Christian or understand Christian leadership. This kind of servant leadership springs from a clear understanding of our role as servants before the Lord. This is our identity—unique yet humble.

In the next paragraph, Paul remembers his time with the church. His memories are filled with tenderness and love. In these short verses, there is a wealth of insight into our security in Christ.

Look at verses 3 through 7.

II. A STRONG AFFIRMATION: INSIGHT INTO OUR SECURITY 1:3-7

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day unto now. For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you are all partakers of grace with me.

As we move into the letter, Paul thanks God for the fellowship of the saints in Philippi. In fact, this little book is essentially a “thank you” note expressing his appreciation for their financial support. Paul had left on his second missionary journey without knowing who would support him. At times, he worked at his trade of tent-making, but more often he was dependent on his fellow believers. When he left Philippi and travelled south to Greece, they supported him not just once but often, without him asking.

While he is filled with thanksgiving for their gifts, his mind focuses on the reason for their love—God’s work in them. Paul’s focus in these verses is on what God has done and is doing in his children. Verse 6 is the pivot upon which this passage turns. The thanksgiving and supplication of verses 3 through 5 rest on the conviction of this verse while this conviction rests on the evidence found in verse 7. There are two principles that we can draw from this passage. The first one is:

A. Our salvation has a divine basis—it is secure

Verse 6 is one of the most powerful Bible verses in terms of assurance. Its message can bring hope to the despairing heart, for it reveals that no other agent is at work but God alone. He covers the beginning, continuation, and completion of our Christian experience.

First, God *began* the work. Only used twice in the New Testament, this verb means “to inaugurate,” implying a decisive and deliberate act. Here was something planned and executed to perfection. The Philippian woman Lydia, the first convert in the church, is a good example of this truth. Paul probably said to her what he said to the Philippian jailer: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” No doubt Lydia could remember

the date of her conversion and often shared about how she had put her trust in Jesus. But when her story was told in Acts, it was not recorded in those terms. Rather, we read, “The Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.” God began the good work in her.

Every conversion is the work of God begun before the foundation of the world when he chose us in Christ. C.S. Lewis acknowledges this about his own conversion, for he was a brilliant British scholar and a committed agnostic when God chose him. In his autobiography *Surprised By Joy*, Lewis described his conversion in this way:

In the trinity Term of 1939 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son, at least, walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape.

C. S. Lewis discovered that salvation is of God. He ran, but God successfully pursued him.

I remember the night in a college dorm when I submitted my will to Jesus Christ. Even though I had read the New Testament and was convinced that Jesus was who he said he was, I had not committed my life to him. God had to bring two men who almost dragged me to another room and ask me, “What is preventing you from committing your life to Christ?” It was at that point that I had to give in and acknowledge that there was no reason for me not to submit to him.

Salvation would be unsure if it depended upon our choosing Christ. There is nothing in our nature that predisposes us to choose God. Not one can claim that he is seeking God. The human will blows hot and cold offering no security of tenure. But the will of God is the ground of our salvation.

Second, the one who inaugurates our Christian life is also the one who undertakes to continue it. Paul says, “He *will perfect* it.” One scholar translates this, “He will evermore put his finishing touches to it.” The verb used implies a process in which God never gives up. He will take responsibility for its progress. He is the one at work in our circumstances “putting the finishing touches” on our salvation. What an assurance! Everything has a purpose—bad news, difficulties, blessings, unexpected happiness or trouble. It all is being used to conform our character to the image of Jesus Christ.

Third, the outcome is guaranteed. God is working according to schedule, and the *day of Christ Jesus* is fixed in his diary. When that day comes, everything and everyone will be ready for it. There will be no last minute rush (as when we prepare for Christmas). Our salvation is as sure as the coming of that day, for as believers we are his saints, the objects of his good work, who must be made ready, conformed to his image.

This is the source of our confidence and assurance. Our salvation can no more be forfeited than the Father break his pledged word to glorify his Son. It is no wonder Paul uses the words of a man who has no doubts: “I am sure.” The perseverance of the saints rests upon the perseverance of God with the saints. Our salvation has a divine basis. It is secure.

Second, we must notice:

B. Our salvation has a human basis—it is visible

When Paul made such important claims on behalf of the Philippians, he was moved by observable facts more than by

loving intuition. It was his recollection of their partnership in the gospel that moved him to express certainty about their eternal state. In other words, his assurance arose from observable facts which evidenced that these people were children of God.

There are three separate strands of evidence that Paul mentions, but they all intertwine around the truth, the common theme of the gospel.

The first thing Paul mentions is their *unanimous submission* to truth. He speaks of their “partnership in the gospel” in verse 5 and of their work in the “defense and confirmation of the gospel” in verse 7. This common oneness of doctrine is the basis of their fellowship and is evidence that they belong to Christ. In fact, the word partnership means “joint-ownership” or “participation in a common purpose.” Second, he speaks about their concern to *spread the truth*. Those who truly possess the gospel also propagate it. The truth is not to be hidden away but passed along. Third, Paul saw a *perseverance in the truth*. Their fellowship had continued “from the first day until now.” Their association with truth was not transient; it did not depend upon favorable circumstances. They stood for the truth even when it could involve imprisonment.

Their lives provided human evidence upon which their assurance was well based. Our salvation has a human basis. It is visible in our lives.

Paul moves on to pray, giving us insight into what maturity looks like. Let us read verses 8 through 11.

III. A POWERFUL PRAYER: INSIGHT INTO OUR

MATURITY 1:8-11

For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Love is the very essence of our new nature

Like all of Paul’s recorded prayers, this one is concerned with their spiritual progress. In particular, this is a prayer about growth and uses imagery from agriculture. You can see this imagery in verse 9 when he says “*abound* still more and more” and again in verse 11 “*fruit* of righteousness.” Thus, we are given an ordered picture of the developing Christian life. There is a growing point from which the young plant thrusts out its shoots. These then bear the blossoms and yield the fruit. Two observations flow from this prayer.

A. The growing point of the Christian life is Love

Love is the seed from which comes vigorous growth. Paul does not mention any object towards which their love is to be directed; he speaks rather of the virtue of love which is to pervade their character and which will then prompt and affect every attitude and action.

Paul understood this kind of love in his own life. Before he reveals he is praying about the place love should have in their experience, he opens his own loving heart to them. Notice some of the qualities of Paul’s love. First, his love for them was real. It

was not a facade, a good show for the benefit of others. In fact, he does not hesitate to call upon God as his witness, the One who knows the heart. Second, his love is intense. He says, "I long for you all."

But the third feature is the most powerful and revealing. Paul's love is like the love of Christ, for he says he loves them "with the affection of Christ Jesus." Certainly this goes beyond merely modelling his love after Christ's. The expression he uses demands more than that. Paul is saying that his heart and Christ's are beating as one. The greater heart, Christ's, has taken over the heart of the servant. The love of Christ had become the center of Paul's character.

When you hear this, you are probably thinking as the Philippians did that you could never love as though the heart of Jesus had taken over. This just seems too remote from the fickleness we customarily experience. But Paul does not speak to them as people who lack love and need to ask for it. Rather, he addresses them as people who possess love and need to make it grow: "...that your love may abound still more." Love is the very essence of the new nature given to every believer.

This was true at Philippi. No sooner had Lydia become a Christian than she begged Paul and his company to be her house-guests. No sooner had the jailer become a Christian than, having fastened Paul's feet in stocks earlier, he began to bathe his wounds. When the hostility of the people forced Paul to leave Philippi, the church sent him financial help more than once. Love was their new nature in Christ.

This is the New Testament claim for the Christian. When Paul says in 2 Corinthians that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation," he is saying that God has done for us everything that needs to be done. We have become partakers of the divine nature. Our earthly life is merely an outworking of what God has already worked inside. We are called to become what we are. In this context, we are called to live out the love that has been shed abroad in our hearts. Love is the growing point of the Christian life.

There is a second observation which naturally follows this.

B. The nourishment for this growth is truth

In what ways does this seed of love need to grow? The growth of love is controlled and directed by knowledge and discernment.

The word "knowledge" occurs twenty times in the New Testament and always refers to knowledge of the things of God--religious, spiritual, theological knowledge. It often has the idea of seeing to the heart of a matter and grasping something completely. Therefore, love grows as our knowledge of Scripture grows. This should give us insight into what love is. It primarily is not an emotion but an act of our will, choosing to consider the highest good of another, to care for his very best. Our love will never grow until our knowledge of the Scriptures grows.

However, not only do we need to know the Scripture, we also need to apply that truth. "Discernment" conveys the idea of perceiving something well enough to be able to make accurate decisions and wise choices. If we merely gather all kinds of knowledge, as we would on a computer and never press the "enter" key, then we have accomplished nothing. I just lost information this morning when the electricity went off because I had not saved any of it. All that knowledge I typed in is lost. We need to make a choice to allow this truth to seep down past our

brains and into our hearts so we can learn how to make wise choices in every situation we face.

Both knowledge and discernment are basic to the task of living the Christian life. We need knowledge to know what to love, and we need discernment to know how to love. This love is learned from the Scriptures.

And the result is the harvest. There is fruit. This seed of love will grow into something greater than itself, a life that is different than we ever thought possible. In verse 10, Paul says that we will "approve the things that are excellent." The word translated "approve" means "to test out and experience," and the word "excellent" refers to things that really matter.

Do you want to invest your life in things that really matter? Do you want your life to count for something? This comes through understanding and submitting to the principles in Scripture. Get to know the word and how to apply it to your life. Then you will find yourself doing the things that are important.

Not only will our priorities change, but so will our character. We will be "sincere and blameless." The word "sincere" means "tested by the sun." There were unscrupulous pottery merchants in Paul's day who frequently disguised their broken wares through devious means. If a vase was cracked, they would fill the cracks with wax and paint over them so that the vase appeared to be perfect. However, the Good Housekeeping people of their day could test these pots by putting them out in the sun. When the heat of the sun melted the wax, the pot would be found to be insincere, impure. In fact, our word "sincere" comes from the Latin word *sincerus* which means "without wax." Paul says that we will be found to be sincere as we continue to grow in grace and knowledge. We will be tested and shown to be without wax.

We will also be "blameless," meaning "giving no offense." That is, we will not cause others to stumble. We will make decisions which are loving, gracious and helpful. In other words, we will not offend others unnecessarily and thereby cause problems.

Obviously Paul is not talking about a sudden transformation or a traumatic, final decision. He is describing a patient progression of growth reflected in our deciding to examine the issues of life in light of Scripture and steadily following the will of God. Our obedience and discipline are not insignificant, nor are they optional.

But we also need to notice, just as the farmer acknowledges, that something else energizes the growth. The Father is ceaselessly at work for the glory of the Son, doing everything to conform us to the image of Christ. Though our work remains difficult, it is not fruitless. Though we are often neglectful, frequently failing and often inadequate, remember that our end is secure. God is at work causing our love to grow as he feeds and nourishes us in the truth.

What a wonderful assurance is ours—a unique identity, an eternal security, and a visible maturity. I pray that this Christmas season this assurance will be yours. Christmas should be more than merely warm reflections on the frailty of a baby or the beauty of motherhood. I pray that you will know the Lord of life in all his majesty and experience the deep joy that comes from that relationship.

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