Philippians

Reformed Expository Commentary

Dennis E. Johnson

"Anything written by Dennis Johnson is well worth reading. He has been thinking about, preaching and teaching from Philippians for many years, so this work is all the more worth reading. It is filled with valuable insights into the biblical text and its practical consequences. This book is a true gem just like the man who wrote it."

—**S. M. Baugh,** Chairman, Department of Biblical Studies, Professor of New Testament, Westminster Seminary California

"Dennis Johnson's *Philippians: To Live is Christ* is a treasured contribution to P&R's Reformed Expository Commentary series. Johnson's experience as a preacher and teacher of preachers not only makes these messages wonderful models of exposition, but also his expertise in biblical theology permeates every page. The Christ-centered focus is beautifully and powerfully interwoven throughout."

—**Bryan Chapell,** Chancellor, Covenant Theological Seminary

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—**Michael S. Horton,** J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

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—**Greg R. Scharf,** Professor of Pastoral Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

"It is truly a delight for me to recommend Dennis Johnson's *Philippians: To Live Is Christ*. Only rarely does one come across a work that so successfully blends scholarship with clarity of exposition and pastoral application. One quickly becomes aware that the author has done his homework and done it well, carefully examining the exegetical options and reaching thoughtful conclusions. No fanciful flights of imagination here. In an admirable way, however, the commentary itself is free from distracting technicalities, so that the reader comes away with a clear understanding of each section as a whole. Moreover, Johnson refuses to treat Philippians as an antiquarian document to be interpreted in isolation from contemporary culture. Instead, he approaches the epistle from the point of view of the modern reader and, as a result, manages to communicate its contents as a living message. In contrast to most commentaries, this work can easily and with pleasure be read through in a few sittings. Anyone who does so will not be disappointed."

—**Moises Silva, T**ranslator or Advisor, The New American Standard Bible, The New Living Translation, The English Standard Version, The Message, and the Nueva Versión Internacional

"Wonderful piece of work: sure-footed, technically competent, instructive, warm, and practical."

—**David F. Wells,** Distinguished Research Professor, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

Philippians

Reformed Expository Commentary

A Series

Series Editors

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken

Testament Editors

Iain M. Duguid, Old Testament
Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

Philippians

Dennis E. Johnson

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For Robert B. Strimple Jr.,
whose exposition of Philippians 2:5–11
in the classrooms of Westminster Theological Seminary
and Westminster Seminary California
has enriched our awe of Christ,
whose preaching of Philippians
has deepened our joy in Christ,
and whose service to Christ's church
shows us the way to seek not our own interests,
but those of Jesus Christ.
Thank you, Bob,
for your friendship over four decades.

Contents

Acknowledgments

It is my joy—an apt word for this epistle!—to thank the team of pastor-scholars who oversee the development of the Reformed Expository Commentary (Philip Ryken, Richard Phillips, Daniel Doriani, and Iain Duguid) for their invitation to contribute this exposition of Philippians. I am grateful for Dan's and Rick's frank and helpful editorial feedback, which improved the work in many ways. I thank the board of trustees of Westminster Seminary California for granting me a study leave in the spring of 2010, during which much of the commentary was converted from spoken sermons into a print form more conducive to reading. I also want to thank John J. Hughes, my friend from seminary days together in the 1970s, for his efficient management of this project on behalf of P&R Publishing; and Karen Magnuson, whose insight and skill as copyeditor has strengthened the commentary in countless ways.

I have been privileged to preach portions of Philippians not only to the congregation that I serve as associate pastor (New Life Presbyterian Church, Escondido, California) but also to others. I thank the Lord and the elders who shepherd these flocks for the opportunity to teach and preach the "word of truth" in their worship. In 2009 it was my joy to teach on Philippians to the overseas and home-office staff of the Rafiki Foundation. The Rafiki "family," which serves orphans and widows in Africa in Jesus' name, exhibits many of the qualities that caused the apostle Paul to love and long for his sisters and brothers in Philippi. Seminary students and spouses enrolled in my fall 2009 elective on Philippians helped me to sharpen my exegetical attention to the text. More than that, our evenings together over those three months led us deeper into the joy in Christ, of which Paul speaks so often in this

little letter. Brothers and sisters, you have waited long to see this fruit of our labors together: here it is at last!

My wife Jane's encouragement has sustained me through yet another prolonged writing project, and her editorial astuteness caught much that needed repair before it met the eyes of other editors. I am thankful to her, and to the Lord for her, every day.

Preeminently, I praise the triune God for answering the prayers of many for the completion of this exposition and for its usefulness to Christ's church. The divine Son who became the Suffering Servant is indeed alive and exalted above all. As this small human work reaches completion by the aid of his Spirit, I thank him that he has begun a more amazing "good work" in all who trust him and that he will most certainly "bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). This attempt to open a petite but powerful portion of his holy Word is offered to the church with a wish echoing Paul's, that "Christ will be honored" through it (1:20).

Series Introduction

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession

of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can

provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

Preface

Biblical commentaries characteristically begin with an introduction that addresses important questions preliminary to the interpretation of specific passages in the book under consideration, particularly matters on which there has been significant controversy among scholars or challenges to the authority or reliability of Scripture since the rise of historical criticism. Such issues include the question of authorship, the general life situation (including sociocultural context) of the author and the original recipients and the specific occasion that prompted the author to write, and the book's purpose(s), possible literary or oral sources, genre(s) and structure, and theological motifs.[1]

This introduction will be brief. For the epistle to the Philippians, questions of authorship and the location of the readers are moot, since a consensus exists across the theological spectrum that Paul the apostle authored the words of this epistle and that its destination was Philippi in Macedonia. There is disagreement, however, regarding whether the epistle was originally a compositional unity in its current order or existed previously as several brief missives that were subsequently combined—out of chronological order—resulting in the text as we now have it. Diversity of opinion also exists regarding the location (provenance) from which Paul wrote—whether it was his imprisonment in Rome, as he awaited Caesar's hearing of his appeal (Acts 28:17–31); the two-year custody that preceded it in Caesarea Maritima, capital of the province of Judea (Acts 23:23–26:32); or an earlier period of custody, not explicitly mentioned in

1. See, for example, Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 1–55; John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 3–20.

the New Testament (but perhaps alluded to in 1 Corinthians 15:32) in Ephesus. Epistles in the Greco-Roman world served various purposes and tended to follow different conventions, depending on the author's aims and relationship to the recipients. Scholars do not agree regarding what type of letter (or letters!) Paul has written to the church at Philippi, and diversity of opinion on this genre question yields differing analyses of the structure and flow of the epistle's argument.

For the purposes of this commentary series, most such introductory questions can be treated helpfully—though by no means exhaustively—in the course of expositing the individual pericopae (text units) of the epistle.[2] For example, Paul's references to his chains, the "imperial guard" (Praetorium), the uncertain outcome of his current captivity (Phil. 1:12–26), and "those of Caesar's household" (4:22) provide the opportunity to clarify the venue and situation from which the apostle wrote. Along with most interpreters over the centuries, I believe that Paul wrote from Rome as he awaited Caesar's decision on the appeal that brought him there from Judea (Acts 26–28). His mention of the Philippians' sufferings (Phil. 1:29–30), his gentle admonitions to unity (2:1–4; 4:2), and his expression of thanks for their generosity (4:10–20) provide glimpses into the Philippians' situation, and therefore suggest parallel circumstances in our hearers' experience that direct us to the text's most appropriate application today.[3] Passages in which Paul invokes "citizenship" terminology distinctive to this letter (1:27; 3:20) are the appropriate places to introduce Philippi's honored status as a Roman colony. In preaching the Word, pastors need to be discerning and strategic in deciding when, how, and how much of the scholarly

2. Since there is no extant manuscript evidence to suggest that the epistle ever existed as anything other than a single, unified document in the form in which we have it, I touch only briefly on the critical speculations that the abrupt transition at Philippians 3:1 or the late discussion of the Philippians' contribution in 4:10–20 might imply that the epistle as we have it was compiled from several pieces of earlier correspondence.

3. Bryan Chapell, author of the Reformed Expository Commentary volume on Ephesians, correctly emphasizes that it is necessary to identify any biblical text's Fallen Condition Focus as we move from exegeting the text's meaning and purpose in its original historical context to expositing and applying it in our contemporary setting. Chapell defines a passage's Fallen Condition Focus as "the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God's people to glorify and enjoy him." Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 50.

discussion should be introduced into sermons. My purpose is to model how to address introductory and background questions in preaching and teaching the church in such a way that the meaning and power of the text are illumined, or objections that our hearers may have encountered are answered, in order to facilitate humble listening to God's Word.

Dennis E. Johnson
Escondido, California
October 2012

Abbreviations

ACCS NT	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament
AYB	The Anchor Yale Bible
BAGD	Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism

Philippians

To Live Is Christ

1

Captivated by Christ Jesus

Philippians 1:1—2

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Phil. 1:1–2)

What do you hear in the opening lines of the apostle Paul's letter to the church at Philippi? Are these words just stock boilerplate "preliminaries," to be skimmed over quickly to get to the meat of the matter? Should we process them the way we do a form letter's impersonal "To Whom It May Concern," or the fake familiarity of "Dear Valued Customer" in computer-generated mass mailings, sent by marketers who consider us "dear" and "valued" only because they want our dollars?

The openings of Paul's letters do sound alike. Their basic components can be found in almost any piece of first-century Greek correspondence: author, recipients, and a greeting (good wishes or a blessing). It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss Paul's handling of this standard template as though it were the thoughtless product of a mechanical "mail-merge" function. As

similar as they seem, each of Paul's letter openings actually introduces key themes to be developed in the rest of the epistle, just as the opening lines of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* foreshadow the tragic story that follows:

> Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
> With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
> Sing Heav'nly Muse.[1]

As these words give a premonition of Adam's fall and its dire effects, while promising rescue through a second Adam, so Paul begins his "conversation" in correspondence with the Philippian congregation with a preview of his agenda for writing. The apostle "tweaks" the Hellenistic epistle template to lay the groundwork on which he will build his pastoral counsel to his friends in Philippi.

The Backstory of the Church at Philippi

Chains and armed guards prevented Paul from carrying on a face-to-face conversation with the Christians of Philippi, so his epistle had to serve as his side of a dialogue between himself, this congregation's founding father, and his beloved children in the faith. Paul and the Philippians shared a history that had forged a strong bond between them. These believers would have heard every word from Paul's pen against the backdrop of that relationship. To pick up the subtle previews embedded in Paul's opening greeting, we need to do some detective work to place ourselves, as much as possible, into the context that the Philippian believers inhabited day by day. We need to comb through the epistle, the book of Acts, and other ancient records reflecting life in Philippi, picking up clues to the situation that prompted Paul to send this missive of warm love and surprising joy.

By the time that Paul, Silas, and their team reached Philippi, this city in eastern Macedonia already had a colorful history. Four centuries earlier, the city had been taken over by King Philip II of Macedonia, father of Alexander

1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.1–6.

the Great—hence the name *Philippi*. In the century before Paul arrived, Julius Caesar's nephew Octavian and the general Marc Antony defeated Caesar's assassins in a decisive battle fought just outside Philippi, and the victors celebrated their triumph by constituting Philippi a Roman colony. That meant that citizens of Philippi had the same legal rights and privileges as citizens of Rome, the capital of the empire. Many retired army veterans settled in Philippi, adding to the city's "Roman flavor," which was reflected in its architecture and its language. Although surrounded by Greek-speaking communities in the eastern Mediterranean, Philippi had Latin as its official language. Not surprisingly, Philippi prided itself on its religious devotion to the Roman emperors, in addition to worshiping indigenous pagan deities. Yet one choice was missing from the smorgasbord of religious options offered in Philippi: there was no synagogue, apparently because the Jewish community was so small that it lacked the minimum quorum of ten males required by rabbinical tradition.[2]

These influences molded the Philippian mind-set that Paul and Silas met as they traveled west along a major Roman road (Via Egnatia) to this significant Macedonian city, located north of the Aegean Sea on the eastern side of what is now Greece. Outside the city gate they found a riverbank where women whose hearts hungered to know the God of Israel had gathered for prayer. One of these was Lydia, a textile importer from Thyatira in Asia, across the Aegean Sea. She believed the gospel as the Lord opened her heart, and offered her spacious home as the missionaries' ministry base (Acts 16:11–15). Later, Paul's exorcism of an evil spirit from a slave girl enraged her owners, who had profited from her "gift" for fortune-telling (16:16–18). The owners gathered a mob and played on Philippi's pride in its privileged link to Rome by accusing Paul and Silas of advocating "customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice" (16:21). To quell the disturbance, Philippi's magistrates ordered beating and incarceration. By the next morning, however, an earthquake and an urgent midnight conversation had brought the jailer and his family from spiritual death into everlasting life (16:25–34).

2. Mishnah Megillah 4.3: "They do not recite the Shema . . . , they do not pass before the ark, [the priests] do not raise up their hands, they do not read the Torah, they do not conclude with a prophetic lection . . . and they do not invoke the name of God in the Grace, [when there are] less than ten." Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 322.

When Paul wrote his letter a dozen years later, some who heard it read aloud had probably lived through those (literally) earth-shaking events. Was Lydia still hosting the church in her home, as she did at first? Was the jailer sitting in the congregation with his family, recalling Paul's bleeding back as the words "the same conflict that you saw I had" (Phil. 1:30) were spoken? Was he replaying in his mind the missionaries' surprising songs in the night as he heard Paul's new report of his current chains and contagious joy (1:18–26)? Was the slave girl there, too, in her right mind, set free by the name of Jesus, to whom every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, as every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord (2:10–11)? Were there Roman citizens who had once praised the emperor as lord and savior but who now rejoiced in a higher citizenship and awaited a greater Savior and Lord: for "our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (3:20)?

Paul had a deep affection for this church. The letter is laced with terms of endearment and expressions of longing for reunion with his friends, to whom Paul says, "I hold you in my heart . . . . I yearn for you with all the affection of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:7–8), and whom he calls "my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown" (4:1).

On the other hand, the members of the Philippian church would also be aware that their congregation had problems. One flaw, which Paul will address later in the letter, was a subtle self-centeredness that showed itself in competing priorities and interpersonal frictions. He keeps returning to this concern:

> Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:3–4)

> Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation . . . . (2:14–15)

> I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel . . . . (4:2–3)

Such rivalries and misunderstandings jeopardized the Philippians' unity at the very time when external pressure from persecution made it all the more imperative that they be "in full accord and of one mind" (Phil. 2:2). Although the physical threat of suffering (1:27–30) and the spiritual threats of Judaizing legalism (3:2–11) and lawless sensuality (3:18–19) lurked in the background, the frictions and fissures that divided these believers weighed most heavily on Paul's heart. Putting it bluntly, the members of this otherwise wonderful church were not jumping for joy at the prospect of being *slaves*, which is precisely the way that Paul unapologetically characterized himself and Timothy. Slaves, after all, had to do what other people wanted. Greeks spoke of them as "talking tools" or "thinking tools," like a plow or a hammer, only more versatile and able to perform a variety of tasks. Slaves had to submit their personal preferences, opinions, convenience, schedules—even their physical health and safety—to the agendas and whims of their masters. Who would volunteer for such a powerless position, unless compelled by armed force or economic necessity?

Later in this letter Paul will explicitly correct the Philippians' self-centeredness. In these opening sentences, he takes a very gentle approach to the sensitive subject of their resistance to the calling of slaves. He presents himself and Timothy as men who have found freedom in being slaves, captivated by Christ. Then he gives reasons to believe that becoming Christ's slave is the road to lasting joy.

Paul makes these points by mentioning one name three times in these two verses: *Christ Jesus . . . Christ Jesus . . . the Lord Jesus Christ*. This threefold repetition foreshadows how thoroughly Paul will extol Christ as the only theme worth preaching (Phil. 1:15, 17, 18), the only master worth honoring (1:20), the only cause to make life worth living and death worth dying (1:21). To each mention of Jesus' name Paul attaches a distinctive phrase:

Servants of Christ Jesus
Saints in Christ Jesus
Grace . . . and peace from . . . the Lord Jesus Christ

These three phrases are keys that unlock the mystery of how Paul and Timothy could find joy in being captivated as Christ's slaves, and how we can experience that same joy.

Servants of Christ Jesus

The epistle's opening verse expresses Paul's first point: The heart of joy is selflessly serving King Jesus and others for his sake.

Slave-Authors

Paul's emphasis on servanthood can be seen in two small but significant variations to the standard opening of a first-century letter. First, with respect to authorship, Paul groups Timothy's name with his own, and then shares with Timothy the title *servants* or, more precisely, *slaves*.[3] In other letters Paul included the names of his colleagues with himself as virtual coauthors (2 Corinthians, Colossians, Philemon, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians). But when he attached titles to names, he affixed one title to himself and another to his colleagues. We read, for example, of Paul the *apostle* and Timothy the *brother* (2 Corinthians; Colossians), or of Paul the *prisoner* and Timothy the *brother* (Philemon). Only in Philippians does Paul open an epistle by associating a colleague with himself *and then link their names* with a shared title, "slaves of Christ Jesus." Why would he do this here and not elsewhere—and, specifically, why choose the title *slaves* to describe himself and Timothy?

The Philippians need to see dramatized in Paul and in Timothy the counterintuitive truth that these men bear God's *authority* because Christ has captivated them as his *slaves*. Paul and Timothy are living proof that those whom Jesus *saves* he *enslaves*. In their self-centered preoccupations and competing agendas, Paul's Philippian friends need to see what joyful slavery looks like, up close and personal.

The claim that Jesus enslaves those he saves may sound harsh and uninviting: what kind of "salvation" is it that deprives us of our cherished autonomy and subjects us to the will of Another? But consider the link between being saved and being enslaved by Jesus from this perspective: everybody is somebody's slave. Despite the inflated claim of William Ernest Henley's Victorian poem "Invictus," none of us can honestly say, "I am the master of my fate:

3. The New Testament writers employ various terms for those whose occupation entails the obligation to serve others' desires and obey others' directives: *diakonos*, *pais*, *hypēretēs*, *therapōn*, and so on. Most of these refer to servants who have liberty, at least potentially, to seek employment in a different household. Paul's term here, *doulos*, refers specifically to "one who is a slave in the sense of becoming the property of an owner." J. P. Louw & E. A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: UBS, 1989), sec. 87.76.

I am the captain of my soul." No matter how much you would like to think otherwise, your every plan and action is driven by a desire to avoid pain or achieve gain by pleasing or placating some "lord" or other. The master you serve may be success or money, or what money can buy. Your lord may be affection or romance, or reputation and respect. You may be enslaved by other people's opinions, terrified at the prospect of rejection or ridicule, or perhaps you are haunted by the specter of life alone.

You also have to face the fact that every master other than Jesus will exploit and disappoint you in the end. Not all are as obvious as the evil spirit that had seized the Philippian slave girl and forced words out of her mouth. Not all are as blatant as the slave girl's owners, who treated her as a moneymaking piece of property. But every master other than Jesus will use you and then discard you. When we realize that we all serve one master or another and that other masters inevitably abuse and fail us, suddenly we find that there is nothing as liberating as being a slave of King Jesus. The church father Chrysostom commented: "One who is a slave of Christ is truly free from sin. If he is truly a slave of Christ, he is not a slave in any other realm . . . ."[4]

Being Jesus' slave not only frees us from every abusive master, but also confers delegated authority. Roman society had taught the Philippians to hear nothing but powerless subservience in the term *slave*. But Paul had introduced them to the Old Testament Scriptures, where the title "slave" or "servant of the Lord" was applied to leaders such as Moses, Joshua, and David.[5] Those ancient servants were previews of the ultimate Servant of the Lord foretold by Isaiah, who would accomplish God's will through obedience and suffering. In this letter Paul uses the title "servant [slave]" just one more time, to describe the Christ who was in the form of God and then took "the form of a servant" and offered the ultimate obedience in death on a cross (Phil. 2:6–8). The Lord delegates authority to his slaves, to accomplish his will and shepherd his people. More than that, the Lord honors the slave's role by assuming it himself in his incarnation.

4. Chrysostom, Homily on Philippians 2.1.2, in *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, ed. Mark J. Edwards, ACCS NT 8 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 217.

5. Neh. 10:29; Josh. 24:29; Ps. 89:20. See Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 45; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 63–64; John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 82; G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 39.

So Paul starts by inviting the Philippians to follow his and Timothy's lead, tasting the freedom of bowing to Christ's lordship. Paul is in custody, probably in Rome, awaiting the outcome of his appeal to Caesar himself. Paul is going to show them how being a slave of Jesus has set his heart free to accept any outcome to his legal case, as long as Christ gets glory through Paul's response to his circumstances. He says in Philippians 1:20: "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death." Paul is so captivated by Christ that all he cares about is seeing his Savior exalted.

Timothy shares the same single-minded focus on pleasing the Master. Paul names Timothy side by side with himself because he intends to send Timothy soon to Philippi. Timothy is so captivated by Christ that he cares more about his fellow Christians than about his own comfort or safety (Phil. 2:19–24). In Timothy's coming they will experience Paul's love, for Timothy is Paul's spiritual son, and sons resemble their fathers. More importantly, Timothy seeks the interests of Jesus Christ and therefore expresses the compassion of Jesus himself.

What would it do for our unity as the body of Christ, for our patience with others who see things differently, if we were to think like Paul and Timothy, to see ourselves as slaves of Christ Jesus? How would it impact our personal and family priorities in the way we spend our free hours and our dollars?

The best way to learn the joy of being Jesus' slave is by watching it worked out in practice. In the midst of our seminary poverty, my wife gave me a book entitled *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive: A Manual of Step-by-Step Procedures for the Compleat Idiot* (now in its nineteenth edition).[6] It avoided mechanics' jargon and had clear, cartoon drawings. Its humor was entertaining. Yet this manual could not compare with standing alongside a real mechanic and watching him work on an engine. The same is true of the process of getting your heart inside the freedom of joyful slavery: you need to watch how "the pros" do it. The Philippians could watch Paul and Timothy "show how it's done," as could other churches. The competitive Corinthians needed to learn humility by watching Paul's and Apollos's collaboration in ministry: "I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your

6. John Muir and Tosh Gregg, *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive: A Manual of Step-by-Step Procedures for the Compleat Idiot*, 19th ed. (Berkeley, CA: Avalon Travel Publishing, 2001).

benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6). The author to the Hebrews urged that congregation's readers to recall the example of past shepherds "and imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7).

Do you have in your circle of acquaintances some "skilled mechanics" in serving Jesus, models in servitude, so that you can watch them and see how it's done? Who are the fathers or mothers, older brothers or sisters in following Jesus whom you are watching as apprentices watch a craftsman—those about whom you say to yourself, "When I grow up, I want to be like him or her, quietly caring for others' needs first"?

Paul stated explicitly to Titus that he expected older Christian women to pass along to younger women the wisdom and spiritual maturity that God had granted them through years of learning and practicing the Word of God (Titus 2:3–5). No doubt he expected older men—and not only those who held the office of elder—to fulfill the same modeling and mentoring roles as those who had learned spiritual maturity: "sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness" (2:2). Although years do not automatically confer wisdom (which is ultimately God's gift, not our achievement, Prov. 2:6; James 1:5), Scripture honors the aged: "Gray hair is a crown of glory" (Prov. 16:31). Many churches today, in a commendable desire to meet the distinctive needs of different groups—children, youth, and adults in various life phases—run the risk of segregating generations, making it hard for those who are younger to get to know those who are more mature. As individuals, too, we may gravitate toward people like us, who share our current interests and issues. When we do, we forgo a rich resource of wisdom that the Lord has prepared in the lives of those who are walking the path of faith ahead of us. Both for our congregations and for ourselves, the biblical model of spiritual nurture through godly examples calls us to honor the elderly and to pursue ways to glean the life lessons that they have to share with us.

Overseers and Deacons

The second adjustment that Paul makes to his customary opening is that he addresses this epistle not only to the church but also to its leaders. This is the only letter that Paul opens with a greeting to the church's officers, its "overseers and deacons." Paul writes nothing randomly. Why, then, this greeting to the church's elders—*overseers* is another term for *elders*

(Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5–7; 1 Peter 5:1–2)—and deacons? We cannot be sure, but the profile of the congregation that we have seen suggests that Paul's purpose is to send hints to the congregation and to the leaders themselves.

First, to the *members of the congregation*, Paul presents a reminder: "When you are tempted to dig in and insist on getting your own way, remember that Jesus has embedded you in a network of authority and accountability, for your own good. You have overseers who are charged to watch out for your well-being and to correct you when you stray. And you have deacons, servants (*diakonoi*), who show you how to care for others with the compassion of Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve (*diakoneō*) (Mark 10:45). Learn the joy of servitude by watching your leaders." Elsewhere Paul instructs Christians "to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (1 Thess. 5:12–13). In contrast to some in our day, who consider church membership to be optional or even suspect, the apostles expected the followers of Jesus to be recognizable not only by their public profession of faith, but also by their commitment to the Christian community and their glad submission to the shepherds that Jesus appoints for his flock (Acts 2:41; 5:13–14; Heb. 13:7, 17).

Second, to the *overseers and deacons*, Paul drops the hint, "Brothers, as you exercise the authority that Jesus has delegated to you, remember that, like Timothy and me, you are 'slaves of Jesus Christ.' To be leaders in Jesus' kingdom is to be slaves of all, serving those whom you shepherd." In Philippians 4:3 Paul will lay on the shoulders of one leader, whom Paul considered his "genuine yokefellow," the heavy burden of helping estranged sisters reconcile with each other. Such intervention demands a spirit of selfless sacrifice. As one commentator observed, "Paul directs his opening greetings to leaders in the church (overseers and deacons) because they were the potential solution to the problem of disunity in the church."[7]

So Paul and Timothy, as "slaves of Christ Jesus," are living proof that the heart of joy is selflessly serving King Jesus and others for his sake. This servant's heart must be seen in the church's leaders and in its members. But what makes serving Jesus so strong a source of delight that even Roman

7. Hansen, *Philippians*, 42. Similarly, O'Brien, *Philippians*, 49–50; and, tentatively, Fee, *Philippians*, 69.

imprisonment could not dampen Paul's joy? The answer is found in Paul's second use of the name of Christ Jesus.

Saints in Christ Jesus

Paul's second use of Jesus' name suggests why being Christ's slaves generates joy: The heart of joyful service is being set apart to stand awestruck before the beauty of King Jesus.

When Paul calls his Philippian friends *saints*, he evokes a picture of privileged access into the very temple of God. We hear the word *saints* repeatedly, but do we pause to ponder what it means? We may say about someone with extraordinary patience, "Oh, she's a saint." But what does the Bible mean by *saint*?

In our English Bibles, the noun *saint* and the adjective *holy* are two ways of talking about the same thing.[8] Although *saint* and *holy* do not look alike in English, they represent the same family of words in the biblical languages, Hebrew (*qadosh*) and Greek (*hagios*). These terms describe the *purity* that befits the *privilege* of standing in the *presence of God*. When the Lord appeared to Moses at the burning bush, God's presence made the ground under Moses' feet "holy," requiring that Moses shed his sandals (Ex. 3:5). On the yearly Day of Atonement, Israel's high priest—with elaborate sacrificial and cleansing rituals—passed through the Holy Place, the sanctuary's outer chamber, into the inner chamber, the Most Holy Place (Ex. 26:33–34; Lev. 16). The turban on his head bore a gold plate engraved, "Holy to the Lord" (Ex. 28:36). The Lord himself is supremely holy, as his awesome seraphim chant thrice over (Isa. 6:3–5). Isaiah trembled to realize that the Lord's holiness—his consuming purity—was lethal to defiled people. Even the high priest's sons were consumed by fire when they treated regulations pertaining to the sanctuary in a cavalier way, for the Lord said, "Among those who are near me, I will be sanctified [treated as holy]" (Lev. 10:1–3).

We might say that *holiness* is "dangerous privilege": dangerous because the all-Holy God is not to be treated casually, but also privilege because we were created to be near him, beholding his beauty and attending to his desires. Our popular usage of *saint* contains a grain of truth: a *saint* is a

8. The words *saint*, *sanctification*, and *sanctuary* came into English from Latin, whereas the words *holy* and *holiness* have homegrown Anglo-Saxon roots.

special person, set apart by God and granted access to God's holy presence. Yet, amazingly, the Bible calls people who are not pure or free of defiling sin *holy* and *saints*. God called Israel to be "a kingdom of priests and a *holy* nation" (Ex. 19:5–6). Though those Israelites were stiff-necked and prone to wander, still he pitched his tent in the middle of their camp. He had picked Israel out of all the nations and separated them as his own property, so they were *saints*, a people holy to the Lord (Deut. 7:6).

Surprising Saints

Paul's personal pedigree included his belonging to this special people, Israel (Phil. 3:5). But in opening this epistle, Paul surprises us by applying this precious title of privilege to a congregation that was composed of all sorts of people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Since the Jewish community in Philippi was so small, most if not all of these "saints" must have been Gentiles, raised in pagan religions. Lydia, the first Philippian believer in Jesus, was a God-fearer (ESV: "worshiper of God") (Acts 16:14). God-fearers were Gentiles who embraced the Jewish belief in one God and tried to follow the Ten Commandments, but did not fully convert to Judaism's dietary and other ceremonial obligations. Then there was the jailer, whom no one would have called a *saint* before the earthquake at midnight. Only after Christ shook his world did he wash his prisoners' wounds. Before that, he hadn't cared.

Now Paul applies the glorious title *saints* to Lydia and the jailer alike. How could the Creator, who is pure clear through, allow soiled, sinful people such as Lydia and that jailer, or Paul and Timothy, or you and me, to stand in his presence, admiring his glory and attending to his wishes? How could people like us even *survive* in the presence of such all-consuming purity? The answer lies in Paul's second use of Jesus' name: we are *in Christ Jesus*.

United to His Holiness

We may be so accustomed to Paul's formula "in Christ" or "in Christ Jesus" that we fail to notice the momentous reality that it conveys. Paul uses this phrase or something like it ("in the Lord" or "in him") over twenty times in this brief letter, the highest concentration in any of his correspondence except Ephesians and Philemon.[9] He uses it to describe the Christian's reason

9. Reumann, *Philippians*, 59.

for rejoicing (Phil. 3:1; 4:4, 10) and source of encouragement (2:1). Being "in Christ" is the protective environment in which God's peace guards our hearts from worry (4:7). "In the Lord Jesus" is the atmosphere in which Paul lays his plans for the future (2:19). But at its core, "in Christ" is Paul's shorthand for the truth that men and women and boys and girls who trust in Jesus are bound tight to him, so that his obedience and sacrifice and resurrection life become theirs. His death on the cross becomes their death under sin's condemnation and their death to sin's domination. His resurrection declares their right standing before God the Judge and ushers them into a new life of freedom to love God. No wonder Paul's desire was to be found "in" Christ, not claiming a righteousness of his own but resting instead in the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ (3:9).

That little word *in* traces the source of our hope to the fact that God has united believers to his Son, and thus given us a share in all that Jesus has accomplished, including Jesus' worthiness to stand in his flawless integrity before his Father. One commentator interpreted Paul's audience as "all in Philippi . . . who are holy through their union with Christ Jesus."[10] That captures Paul's point well. Only because Jesus was holy straight through, from start to finish, can we stand in the presence of the all-holy God and delight in his beauty rather than being incinerated by his white-hot purity.

For All the Saints

God's grace, which makes us fit to bask in his beauty, embraces "*all* the saints." Paul will include "you all" in his prayers, his confidence, his gospel partnership, and his longing (Phil. 1:4, 7, 8). Each "you all" is intentional: Paul embraces every believer in Philippi, and they need to do the same to one another. The rifts in the church in Philippi were not as deep as the party spirit at Corinth, where Christians sounded like children arguing at recess: "I'm on Paul's team," "I'm with Apollos," "I'm all for Peter," "I'm on Jesus' side" (1 Cor. 1:12). Even though the fissures in Philippi were not the chasms of Corinth, the Philippian church needed Paul's call to unity (Phil. 1:27; 2:1–4).

When our priorities compete and our preferences clash in the church, we tend to reduce Paul's *all* to *some*. We may say to ourselves, "I find it easy to

10. Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 38.

serve with *some* of the saints, give thanks for *some* of the saints, and pray for *some* of the saints. But there are others . . . I'm not saying they are not saints, of course. But we rub each other the wrong way. We need to give each other plenty of space. You understand."

Paul says, "*No*, I do *not* understand. Since your status as saints is 'in Christ Jesus' and in his grace alone, I insist on embracing *you all* in my love, and I expect *you all* to do the same to each other." Later he will marshal reasons for our commitment to unity: "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (Phil. 2:1–2). Our backgrounds and life experience may be so different that we do not *naturally* fit together. But if we are "saints in Christ Jesus," our lives have been *supernaturally* and inextricably interwoven.

Yet this single-minded, single-hearted unity is not easy to live out in practice in the daily frictions that try our patience with one another. When things don't go our way, it is easy to pull up stakes and move on to the next congregation, rather than to stay and work through hurt feelings or competing visions. What force is strong enough to hold us together, when our self-centeredness and our culture's individualism threaten to pull us apart? Paul's third use of Jesus' name answers that question.

Grace and Peace from Christ Jesus

Paul's opening blessing shows that Christ's grace and peace have the power to turn selfless service into lasting joy.

The typical first-century letter followed the identification of author and readers with the Greek word *chairein*.[11] *Chairein* meant "Rejoice"; but as often happens with commonly used expressions, in epistle openings *chairein* had faded into a colorless "Greetings." (How many people think "God be with you" when they say, "Goodbye"?) Yet Paul doesn't write meaningless Greek. He replaces *chairein* with a like-sounding Greek word, *charis*, which captures the heart of the gospel: "grace."

On the part of his dear friends at Philippi Paul is invoking nothing less than the favor of God, the embrace of the Father, lavished as a free gift

11. Acts 15:23; 23:26; James 1:1. See Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, rev. ed., WBC 43 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 12.

on those who deserve condemnation. Paul is pleased that these folks are "partakers with me of grace" (Phil. 1:7). Both their faith in Christ and the privilege of suffering for his sake are gifts of God's grace (1:29).[12]

Grace from the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ is the source of that astonishing exchange that Paul had described in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." In his epistle to the Philippians he portrays each side of this exchange of grace. In chapter 2 we hear that Christ, who was "in very nature God" (NIV), took a servant's nature and died on a cross (Phil. 2:6–8). In chapter 3 we hear the other side of the exchange: Paul is found in Christ, receiving right standing with God through faith in Christ (3:9). This is the amazing "trade": Jesus the innocent condemned and punished, and we the guilty declared right in God's sight.

The result is *peace*, the reconciling reality that secures our place in God's heart. Nothing but God's grace could give us peace with God. Our insults to his honor created a chasm of antagonism between us and our Creator, and this terrible divide will not disappear just by our pretending it isn't there. This is also true in our relationships with each other. When someone has hurt you, it doesn't "make the problem go away" for the offender to ignore the pain he has inflicted, and to say glibly, "Well, let's just move on now." The injury has to be acknowledged, and the pain has to be dealt with. Peacemaking always has its price, even among human beings. The aggressor must pay the price of humbling himself and admitting the wounds that his words or deeds have inflicted. When possible, he makes amends. The victim, too, pays a price: the price of releasing resentment rather than holding the offender's guilt as a weapon to be wielded against him in the future.

The wonder of the gospel is that, though we must admit with grief that we have offended our good Creator, the God whose honor we have violated has come to absorb the pain that should be ours. Paul reminded the Christians at Ephesus that Jesus is the ultimate Peacemaker and that the price of peace was his death: he "reconcile[d] us both to God in one body *through*

12. The Greek verb *charizomai* (ESV: "granted") is a cognate of the noun *charis* ("grace"). The verb does not always connote the bestowing of an *undeserved* gift (see its use in 2:9 [ESV: "bestowed on"]). But the conceptual parallel between Philippians 1:29 and Ephesians 2:8–9 ("by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works") supports the understanding that in Philippians 1:29 the verb expresses a granting that is by God's undeserved grace.

the cross" (Eph. 2:14, 16). The peace that Christ secured for us frees us to pay the price of making peace and keeping peace with each other, to put others' needs and interests above our own.

Grace and peace belong to those who approach God as "Father" and who bow to Jesus Christ as "Lord." God's grace and peace impart not only forgiveness but also transformation of the direction and affections of our hearts. God is not so incompetent as to leave us forgiven but unchanged in the poisonous self-centeredness of our hearts. The people on whom God the Father and his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, set their invincible love will never again be satisfied to be locked into our own interests, fixated on our own reputations, or enslaved to our own self-image. Christ's glory becomes our heart's chief delight, and his love for others ignites our compassion.

To receive grace and peace from the Father and the Lord Jesus is to discover the joy of belonging to the Master who made and redeemed us for himself. *The Book of Common Prayer* captures the paradox of our status as slaves of Christ when it speaks of God "whose service is perfect freedom."[13] The authors of the Heidelberg Catechism were right to affirm that the Christian's only comfort in life or death is "that I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ."[14] To belong to Another—to be captivated by Christ Jesus—is true liberty.

Subverting Our Self-Centeredness

At first glance, these two brief verses seemed so matter-of-fact, didn't they? They looked like the preliminaries that we could skim over quickly. Now that we have listened more closely, however, we discover that from his

13. "O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom." "The Order for Daily Morning Prayer," A Collect for Peace, in *The Book of Common Prayer . . . according to the use of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (New York: Seabury, 1953), 17.

14. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 1, Question and Answer 1: "Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." Accessed at http://www.crcna.org/pages/heidelberg_intro.cfm.

opening syllables Paul has gently brought us into the heart of the matter, subtly subverting our instinctive self-centeredness.

We like to be lords. Even if we cannot make others do our bidding, at least we want to call the shots for our own lives. But Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ, turn upside-down our assumption that freedom is found in getting our own way. Have you experienced the liberation of surrendering to the mastery of Jesus the Christ, the eternal Son of God who became a slave, to free you from yourself and from the masters that drive you?

God designed us for togetherness and created us for community. But indifference, isolation, and competition have seduced us into thinking that freedom is found in "looking out for Number One," keeping options open, and avoiding long-term commitments. Paul and Timothy challenge our self-defensive individualism, throwing their arms wide to embrace "all the saints in Christ Jesus." None of us stands alone. Each needs the support and accountability of the rest of the body of Christ. Are there any "saints in Christ Jesus" whom you have trouble loving as brothers or sisters? Do you honor and heed the shepherds and servants in whose care God has placed your spiritual well-being? Do you pray for them, encourage them, and respect them as they protect the church's unity and purity?

Do you realize how much you need the grace of God in order to have peace with God? To enjoy a reconciled relationship with the holy God, we need grace that we have not earned and could never deserve. Does the matchless condescension of the Lord Jesus Christ so grip your heart that you are humbled and hope-filled at the same time?

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