

STRIVING
FOR THE
FAITH

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*A Journey through Philippians
for Life on Mission*

Alex Kocman



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*To my sons and daughters.
May the Lord fill you with strength and joy
as you put your hands to the plow in the Lord's field.*

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FOREWORD

The letters of Paul in the New Testament are missionary literature. They were part of the apostle's missionary method. Paul and his companions traveled around the Mediterranean world to places where Christ was not yet known. As they went, they preached the gospel, established churches, disciplined believers, and raised up leaders. Sometimes their stay in a given city was cut short by violent opposition. At other times, they were able to stay longer and invest more deeply in the lives of the saints. However, it was never their intent to settle in one place indefinitely, but always to press on deeper into the darkness, taking with them new missionary partners God raised up along the way. At the same time, Paul and his team refused to engage in "hit and run" missions. Once they had established a church, they remained connected to it and continued to care for it, despite the challenges of communication and transportation in the ancient world.

When Paul was able, he revisited the churches he had started to see how they were doing and to give them assistance in their growth in grace. At other times, he sent coworkers like Timothy and Titus to minister to the needs of these new churches on the mission field. Because of the free flow of travel and trade enabled by the *Pax Romana*, he stayed abreast of news from the churches through travelers he encountered on his journeys. Most importantly for us, he wrote letters. Many of these letters, like the letter to the Philippians, were to churches he had started. As a responsible missionary, he used the communication method available to him to give encouragement and to address issues faced by new churches full of new Christians in a pagan environment. The Holy Spirit inspired these letters and preserved them for us. In interpreting them, we always need to keep in mind that these are missionary letters written by a

first-century missionary to missionary churches. We will only interpret them correctly if we remember that they were written in the context of the gospel advance to unreached peoples and places.

Christians in every age are a missionary people. The theme of God's heart for the nations, and His plan to save a people for Himself from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, runs from Genesis to Revelation. The Great Commission, which Jesus gave repeatedly during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension, has not yet been completed and remains binding on the church. A true disciple of Jesus shares the heart of the Father, and His heart is to have a multitude of worshipers from every people and language on earth who give Him the glory due His name. It is not helpful to say that every Christian is a missionary because not every Christian is sent out from his or her local church to carry the gospel across cultural, linguistic, or geographic boundaries, but it is absolutely true that every Christian should have a passion for missions. Every church should embrace the Great Commission, and a local church with no engagement in global missions is not a healthy church. Even the poorest church can pray and give to the global advance of the gospel, and most churches in the Western world can also send and go. This should not be the special interest of just a few people in the church. A fundamental part of what it means to be a healthy Christian is a deep desire to see the gospel reach the ends of the earth.

However, it is easy for believers to lose sight of this priority. Our lives are wrapped up in local concerns. When we read our Bibles, our natural tendency is to read ourselves and our circumstances into the text. Even if our church partners with missionaries, we usually only think of them on special occasions. Day to day, our focus is on our own context, and this focus manifests itself in our devotional lives. That is why this volume by my friend Alex Kocman is so valuable. Alex

is well trained in biblical interpretation, and he handles the text of Philippians well. The unique feature of this devotional commentary, however, is the manner in which he remembers the missionary setting of the book and draws the reader's attention to the missionary implications of what he is reading. There are many occasions in this book when the reader is challenged to lift his eyes beyond his own situation to consider the things missionaries experience as they labor in difficult environments. The reader is constantly challenged to pray for missionaries and for the advance of the gospel. In a graciously disturbing way, the reader is also challenged to consider the great need for more workers for the harvest field, the reality that none of us belong to ourselves, and the truth that all of us are called to be willing to go anywhere and pay any price for the glory of God. This is not a safe book. It is not a tame, abstract commentary. It will set the book of Philippians in a light you may have never considered before. It will also set your life as a Christian in a light you may have never considered before. By God's grace, it will hopefully compel you to ask how you are called to obey the Great Commission. It might even begin a process that could land you on the other side of the world. What all of us who have served the cause of the gospel overseas can tell you is that it is completely worth it.

So, with those warnings, I commend this book to you. Don't rush through it. Consider carefully the missional interpretation of each text. Pray each written prayer thoughtfully (but only if you can do so honestly!), and spend unhurried time talking through each of the prayer prompts with your Heavenly Father. It may be that not only your perspective, but the very course of your life, will change as a result. Take up and read!

Zane Pratt
Vice President, Training
International Mission Board, SBC

INTRODUCTION

In the culmination of the Gospel of Matthew, the risen Lord Jesus Christ concludes His earthly ministry by issuing a commission to His apostles and those who would follow them:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:18–20)¹

This momentous charge forms the backbone of the New Testament. Heeding its instruction, our Lord's disciples went out to make Him known among the nations. Today, as believers in Christ, we stand on the shoulders of saints who took seriously their marching orders, carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth and transforming the course of civilizations forever through the leavening presence of culture-shaping grace.

Yet the New Testament is surprisingly devoid of detailed instruction for the task of mission for individual believers. The apostles' ministry in Acts models their understanding of the Great Commission task as they give themselves to gospel proclamation, ongoing discipling of new believers, church planting, and appointment of qualified church leaders. Timothy, as a pastor, is told to do the work of an evangelist. Yet beyond this, we are not given detailed guidance concerning the manner of the individual believer's engagement in the mission given by Christ. The frequency and style of our personal evangelism are

¹ All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), unless otherwise stated.

never prescribed with specificity. We are not provided with an ideal ratio of how many church members to mobilize to the mission field and how many should remain behind to hold the rope. Neither are our consciences bound to a particular program by which we are to care for the poor, plant gospel-centered churches, or saturate our homeland with Christian influence.

Some have concluded from this lack of specificity that mission is not the task of the whole body of Christ but of an elite few—of apostles, evangelists, and pastors. Others have rightly pointed out that the New Testament is not written to train non-missional believers in the art of mission but is rather written with the assumption that its readers were already naturally about the work of mission. Indeed, many of the exhortations of the New Testament make little sense apart from this underlying reality.

This is not an oversight on the part of the Holy Spirit. In His providence, He apparently did not determine such information needful for His people. Context, prudence, and conscience would instead govern the matter in which Christians would discharge their obligations. Rather, in inspiring Scripture, there was something else the Spirit desired.

Scripture *does* provide sufficient motivation for the work of mission. In framing the grand, sweeping doctrines of grace that reveal God's purposes in redemption, the Word of God reveals the heart of God for the world of God to the people of God. In the New Testament, we find the fulfillment of the promises of God summed up in Christ, whose virgin birth, righteous life, obedient death, victorious resurrection, and conquering session in heaven change sinners' hearts, reconcile them to God, and draw the nations back to God. Situating ourselves within this cosmic biblical story, we are drawn gravitationally into the love of God and thrust out toward poor and needy sinners.

Put another way, Scripture recognizes that evangelism is an inescapable concept. We are all always evangelizing for something, heralding someone's news, for good or ill. We cannot help but tell of that which we treasure. We will always sing the praises of that which we savor most, be it our families, careers, favorite politician or sports franchise, wealth, or even suffering or victimhood. Crafted in the *imago Dei*, we are made for worship. Mission is, in one sense, the natural overflow of our worship. As a result, the New Testament is more concerned with filling our hearts to overflow on mission than with dictating the exact course of such outpouring.

This is not to say that all methods or models we might employ in the missionary task are equally valid or faithful to the biblical ideal. Regarding issues of worship, Reformed Protestants have long held to the *regulative principle*, the conviction that only what is expressly commanded in Scripture is to be observed in liturgical expression. We might also extend this principle to matters of ministry and mission, applying it not only vertically (in relation to God) but horizontally (in relation to our fellow men). Our commitment to Scripture precludes us from employing just any means in advancing the cause of the gospel. We are limited to the means given to us in Scripture: ordinary means of grace such as prayer, clear proclamation of Scripture and its contents, exhortation and instruction, the proper administration of the sacraments, faithful practice of church membership and discipleship, and the like. The Word of God is sufficient to equip believers for the work of ministry in all places, times, and circumstances (2 Tim. 3:16).

Yet before God's Word equips the saints for mission, it impels them. "The love of Christ controls us," the apostle Paul writes (2 Cor. 5:14). Addressed to those who are already engaged in Christ's cause, Scripture reinforces and underscores the biblical mandate for mission by inviting us into the sweeping arc of God's purposes for His world in Christ.

Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the book of Philippians. While many of the New Testament epistles are written primarily to instruct erring believers in some point of doctrine or to correct some matter of practical ethics, this letter almost seems to stand entirely on its own, unencumbered by such considerations. In it, Paul writes with joy to a joyful church that has already demonstrated its propensity for mission.

The church at Philippi had its origins in Paul's ministry. After receiving his Macedonian call (Acts 16:9–10), Paul journeyed from Troas across the Aegean Sea to the Balkan Peninsula, soon arriving on the shores of Philippi and encountering Lydia, who would become his first European convert (Acts 16:14–15). Immediately, Lydia's home became a base of operations for Paul's itinerant ministry. After exorcising a fortune-telling spirit (Acts 16:16–18) and facing backlash, Paul found himself imprisoned in Philippi, only to be delivered miraculously and to witness the conversion of the jailer (Acts 16:25–34). The Philippian church was born suddenly, was attended to with manifestations of spiritual power, and was marked by the rise of a close-knit fellowship of converts who shared Paul's passion for the mission. The New Testament epistle bearing their name, written in approximately AD 61 while Paul was in Roman custody (see Acts 28:30–31, Phil. 1:7), is thus characterized by all the warmth and affection of a minister who had often been the beneficiary of their fellowship and generosity.

Yet at some point this vibrant body was lost to the pages of history. After the apostolic period, the Philippian congregation begins to fade from view. Mentioned by Ignatius and addressed by Polycarp, the church cameos in various patristic writings and records but recedes after these early centuries of the church. By the medieval period, the once-glorious Roman colony had devolved into a small village, until eventually the original city

fell into disrepair, and with it, its church.² We do not know what circumstances preceded the eventual dissolution of this congregation, whether their lampstand stood firm to the end or if they met their end inwardly and spiritually before they did so externally and visibly. Regardless, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that perhaps somewhere along the way this church lost sight of its first love, its great missional end, its zeal for the advance of the glory of God.

We live in an age of the widespread proliferation of resources for Christian mission. This is a blessing. But if we are honest, despite the overabundance of equipping resources surrounding us, our hearts are prone to grow cold. The love of Christ, rather than directing us outward to a world in need, begins to feel cold and distant to us. Perhaps, lest we become like the Philippian church in its latter days of obscurity, we need more than mere practical guidance in order to live lives of kingdom significance.

What we need today is not an exhaustive compendium of every contingency of Christian living, as though we were under grace for salvation but under law for mission. What we need is to be immersed in the same glorious truths in which the Philippians themselves were steeped during their early days, those objects of the faith set forth in Paul's famed letter. We need our hearts to beat in sync with Paul's and with the hearts of these early Christians so that we can devote ourselves joyfully to the mission of God as they did. In short, we need to glory in Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:26; 3:3), have the mind of Christ (2:5), persevere in godliness (3:14), rejoice in the Lord (3:1; 4:4), and pursue that which is good, true, and beautiful (4:8–9).

As the title of this work reveals, the book of Philippians stands as a reminder, above all, to strive "side by side for the faith

² Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians: A Revised Text with Introduction, Notes, and Dissertations*, 8th ed. (London & Cambridge: Macmillan & Co., 1888), 64.

of the gospel” (1:27)—that is, to contend together as Christ’s body for the advance of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. We will survey the epistle in four parts, corresponding to its four chapters and consisting of forty-five individual sections, showing us what it means to strive for the faith through joyful partnership (chapter 1), humble mission (chapter 2), persevering devotion (chapter 3), and radical contentment (chapter 4).

In line with our topic’s practical focus, each short section is structured as a devotional, featuring a final prayer and extra thoughts for reflection and prayer. Sometimes, these devotionals use a first-person perspective to add a personal touch, as they include not only scriptural analysis but also insights from my own study, preaching, and life experiences. The prayers are crafted in first-person plural to enhance your worship experience, whether at home, church, or elsewhere, emphasizing our collective dedication to the Lord’s service and not merely our individual piety. Originally published as a weekly serial on the website of the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE), this book began as a collection of regular prayer prompts for a global missions agency. While it leans toward applying principles to cross-cultural missions, the core intent of this volume is to address the entire church, emphasizing our shared mission imperative regardless of our station in life.

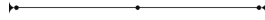
Immersing ourselves in this epistle’s riches, may we learn the art of striving arm in arm on mission together, living gloriously unwasted lives in the service of our Lord. So, let us commence our journey to be like the Philippians.

PART 1

STRIVING FOR THE FAITH THROUGH JOYFUL PARTNERSHIP

(PHILIPPIANS 1:1–30)

CHAPTER 1



GRACE AND PEACE TO GOD'S SERVANTS

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)

First impressions are pivotal. Consider the substantial contrast between entering the office on a Monday morning and enthusiastically declaring “Good morning, team!” as opposed to merely stating “I made it.” Similarly, envision the profound effect of a pastor commencing his sermon with the authoritative proclamation “Thus saith the Lord!” in comparison to the same pastor hesitantly searching through his notes and murmuring “Well, folks, here’s what was on my mind this week.”

The opening words of any letter are important, and Scripture is no different. For the apostle Paul, operating under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, greeting his audience wasn’t just a matter of routine. It was a chance to set the tone for how he felt about his beloved readers—and how God Himself feels about them.

Paul first identifies himself and Timothy as “servants” (*douloi*, literally “slaves” or “bondservants”) of Christ Jesus. Paul is not pulling rank as an apostle—he’s doing the opposite. He is a slave of Christ, a sinner saved by Christ and subject to the one who saved him. He comes to his fellow believers sincerely and tenderly with open palms upraised.

The apostle then identifies his audience as “all the saints” in Philippi, a Roman colony. In the Western world, especially among those influenced by Roman Catholicism, we may be inclined to think of a saint as an especially exemplary Christian leader, cleric, or martyr. But that isn’t Paul’s meaning. For Paul, all followers of Christ are saints—*hagioi*, “holy ones”—made holy not by their own merit but by virtue of the redemptive work of Christ on their behalf and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Paul further addresses the overseers and deacons “with” the saints. In one sense, pastor-elders and deacons are not *above* the laity *per se* but are *alongside* or *with* them. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Paul loved each member of this church dearly.

Then, Paul greets his audience: “Grace to you and peace from God....” This salutation is laden with theological significance. “Grace” (*charis*) is a play on the common Greek word for “greetings” (*chairein*), transforming this ordinary word to evoke the unmerited kindness of God in salvation. “Peace” recalls the Hebrew greeting *shalom*, still heard today among Hebrew speakers, which suggests the total wholeness of life and society in tranquility that only God can provide. Importantly, true saving grace and peace with God can only come to us from God in Christ. Grace and peace are our birthright in the gospel. They undergird the whole Christian life, assuring believers of their total acceptance before God.

When times and seasons cause us to reflect—major holidays, trials, or the simple turning over of the calendar—we are tempted to live in regret, shame over past sins, or worry concerning future events. Regardless of the season in which we find ourselves, we all acutely feel the need for a clear word from God. Those serving in ministry in local churches, ministry organizations, or on the

mission field are even more prone to think in this way. *What does God think of me? How am I doing?*

In addressing the Philippians in these opening verses, it is as though Paul marches into his pulpit and declares, “Thus saith the Lord: God sends you His grace and peace.” If you are a Christian, rest assured: God has shown you His undeserved grace and granted you absolute peace in relation to Him. With this foundation, we can rest confidently in Christ’s love and press on in our love and service to Him in return.

Paul also specifies that this grace and peace comes “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us about God’s inseparable operations—that when one divine person undertakes an action, the whole Godhead is, in a sense, engaged in that action as well. For many, this is a new way of thinking about God. We are accustomed to seeing the Father as a vengeful judge who must be appeased by Christ’s sacrifice before He is willing to love us. This is akin to what the ancient heretic Marcion (AD 85–160) taught, but it is not the biblical gospel.

The Father and Son are unified in their love for us (John 16:27). It is true that Christ’s sacrifice appeased the just wrath of God on our behalf (Rom. 3:25). But the Son is sent on His mission to save us *because* the Father already loved and chose us (John 6:39). Thus, Paul assures the Philippians that God’s love for them is as pure and undivided as the Trinity itself. God’s grace and peace are sent from the Father, purchased by the blood of the Son, and applied to the believer by the Holy Spirit. Praise God for the unchanging reality of His grace and peace in our chaotic world.

PRAYER

Triune God, thank You for regarding all Your servants, ministers, and children as beloved, holy saints. Thank You for giving us Your saving grace in Jesus Christ. Thank You for Your peace—refuge from judgment and confidence to face the trials of life. Help us to always remember that we are under Your grace and have peace with You. Grant our families, our churches, our leaders, and the missionaries we support to know this same grace and peace. In Jesus's name, amen.

MORE PRAYER PROMPTS

- Pray for the pastors and deacons of your church to know the grace and peace of God in a special way in their present season of ministry.
- God's peace comes to us amid a conflict-drenched world. As wars continue in countries where serving Christ can be especially challenging, pray for the peace of God to rule in the hearts of frontline workers in war-torn contexts.
- Pray for pastors, evangelists, or missionaries who may be struggling with discouragement. Pray that they would sense God's grace and peace personally and intimately.