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Professor of Religion and Greek at Grove City College
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Philippians

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Philippians

David T. A. Strain



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Philippians

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Series Introduction

The greatest need of the church today is the recovery of sound biblical preaching. We need preaching that faithfully explains and applies the text, courageously confronts sin, and boldly trumpets forth the sovereign majesty, law, and gospel promises of God. This type of powerful proclamation has vanished in many quarters of the evangelical church only to be replaced by that which is anemic and man-centered. Instead of doctrinally rich exposition which strengthens faith and fosters Christian maturity, the standard fare has become informal, chatty, anecdote-laden messages, devoid of instruction in the truths of the Christian faith. This approach leaves unbelievers confused and keeps believers in a state of chronic spiritual adolescence.¹

There is indeed a dire need for the recovery of solid biblical preaching. Not only does reformation of this sort lead Christ's sheep back to the verdant pastures of His soul-nourishing Word, it also provides a good example for present and future generations of

1. A stinging, yet constructive, critique of modern-day preaching is found in T. David Gordon's *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2009). "I have come to recognize that many, many individuals today have never been under a steady diet of competent preaching.... As starving children in Manila sift through the landfill for food, Christians in many churches today have never experienced genuine soul-nourishing preaching, and so they just pick away at what is available to them, trying to find a morsel of spiritual sustenance or helpful counsel here or there" (Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, 17). Elements of this introduction are adapted from Jon D. Payne, "The Roaring of Christ through *Lectio Continua* Preaching," *Modern Reformation* 19, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 2010): 23–24, and are used by permission of the publisher.

ministers. For this reason, we are pleased to introduce The *Lectio Continua* Expository Commentary on the New Testament, a new series of expository commentaries authored by an array of seasoned pastor-scholars from various Reformed denominations on both sides of the Atlantic.

What is the *lectio continua* method of preaching?² It is simply the uninterrupted, systematic, expository proclamation of God's Word—verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book—that endeavors to deliver the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26–27). Christian discipleship is impoverished when large portions of Scripture are ignored. Carried out faithfully, the *lectio continua* method ensures that every passage is mined for its riches (even those verses which are obscure, controversial, or hard to swallow). Paul states that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:16–17 KJV).

Lectio continua preaching has a splendid heritage. It finds its roots in the early church and patristic eras. Its use, however, was revived and greatly expanded during the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. When Huldrych Zwingli (d. 1531) arrived at the Zurich Grossmunster in 1519, it was his desire to dispense with the standard lectionary³ and introduce *lectio continua* preaching to his congregation by moving systematically through the Gospel of Matthew. At first, some members of his church council were suspicious. They were uncomfortable replacing the lectionary with this

2. In Christianity, *lectio continua* (Latin for continuous reading) originally referred to the practice of reading Scripture sequentially in public worship, as was the practice of the ancient church. This practice is recommended by the Westminster divines in the Directory for Public Worship, which, in turn, served as an impetus for *lectio continua* preaching. Sadly, Scripture reading in this manner has been neglected in Reformed and Presbyterian churches for many generations, perhaps as far back as the eighteenth century, when public worship was reduced to sermon-hearing sessions.

3. A lectionary is a plan or table of Scripture passages to be read in the services of church for each day or week of the year.

seemingly new approach. But Zwingli explained that the *lectio continua* method of preaching was not new at all. On the contrary, important figures such as Augustine (d. 430), Chrysostom (d. 407), and Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) all employed this homiletical approach. Zwingli is quoted by his successor, Heinrich Bullinger (d. 1575), as saying that “no friend of evangelical truth could have any reason to complain” about such a method.⁴

Zwingli rightly believed that the quickest way to restore biblical Christianity to the church was to preach the whole counsel of God verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book, Lord’s Day after Lord’s Day, year after year. Other Reformers agreed and followed his pattern. In the city of Strasbourg, just ninety miles north of Zurich, preachers such as Martin Bucer (d. 1551), Wolfgang Capito (d. 1570), and Kaspar Hedio (d. 1552) practiced *lectio continua* preaching. Johannes Oecolampadius (d. 1531) boldly preached the *lectio continua* in Basel. And let us not forget John Calvin (d. 1564); between 1549 and 1564, the Genevan Reformer preached sequentially through no fewer than twenty-five books of the Bible (over two thousand sermons), which he was able to do because he also preached regularly for weekday services.⁵

The example of these Reformers has been emulated by preachers throughout the centuries, from the post-Reformation age down to the present. In the last half of the twentieth century, Donald Grey Barnhouse (1895–1960), Martyn Lloyd-Jones (d. 1981), William Still (d. 1997), James Montgomery Boice (d. 2000), and John MacArthur all boldly preached straight through books of the Bible from their pulpits. But why? Surely we have acquired better, more

4. It is interesting to note that the year before Zwingli began preaching sequentially through books of the Bible, he had received a new edition of Chrysostom’s *lectio continua* sermons on Matthew’s gospel. See Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Black Mountain, N.C.: Worship Press, 2004), 195. Cf. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 4: *The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), and Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011), 228–53.

5. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 159.

contemporary methods of preaching? Is the *lectio continua* relevant in our twenty-first-century context? In a day when biblical preaching is being increasingly undermined and marginalized by media/story/therapy/personality-driven sermons, even among the avowedly Reformed, these are important questions to consider.

Shortly before the apostle Paul was martyred in Rome by Emperor Nero, he penned 2 Timothy. In what proved to be some of his final words to his young disciple, he wrote, “I charge thee therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ...*preach the word*; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:1–2 KJV). This directive was not meant only for Timothy. It is the duty of every Christian minister (and church) to heed these timeless words; according to God’s divine blueprint for ministry, it is chiefly through the faithful proclamation of the Word that Christ saves, sanctifies, and comforts the beloved church for which He died.⁶ In other words, the preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments are the divinely sanctioned and efficacious means by which Christ and all His benefits of redemption are communicated to the elect. For this reason alone the *lectio continua* method of preaching is a helpful practice in our churches, providing a steady diet of law and gospel from the entirety of God’s Word.

Some may ask, “Why another expository commentary series?” First, because in every generation it is highly valuable to provide fresh and reliable expositions of God’s Word. Every age possesses its own set of theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural challenges. Thus, it is beneficial for both current and rising ministers in every generation to have trustworthy contemporary models of biblical preaching. Second, these volumes uniquely feature the expositions of an array of pastors from a variety of Reformed and confessional traditions. Consequently, this series brings a wealth of exegetical, confessional,

6. See Matthew 28:18–20; Romans 10:14–17; 1 Corinthians 1:18–21; 1 Peter 1:22–25; Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 89.

experiential, and practical insight, and furnishes the reader with an instructive and stimulating selection of *lectio continua* sermons.

This series is not meant to be an academic or highly technical commentary. There are many helpful exegetical commentaries written for that purpose. Rather, the aim is to provide *lectio continua* sermons, originally delivered to Reformed congregations, which clearly and faithfully communicate the context, meaning, gravity, and application of God's inerrant Word. Each volume of expositions aspires to be redemptive-historical, covenantal, Reformed and confessional, Trinitarian, Christ-centered, and teeming with spiritual and practical application. Therefore, we pray that the series will be a profound blessing to every Christian believer who longs to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).

We are pleased to announce that this series of commentaries is now being published by Reformation Heritage Books, which graciously agreed to take over this large task from Tolle Lege Press. We thank Tolle Lege for printing the first three volumes (*First Corinthians* by Kim Riddlebarger, *Galatians* by J. V. Fesko, and *Hebrews* by David B. McWilliams). We, Joel Beeke and Jon Payne, look forward to coediting the remainder of the series for Reformation Heritage Books. The goal is to publish two volumes per year in the King James or New King James Version, according to the choice of each author.

In addition to thanking Reformation Heritage Books and its faithful team for producing this series, we wish to thank our churches, Christ Church Presbyterian, Charleston, South Carolina, and the Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, Michigan, for warmly encouraging us as ministers to work on projects such as this one that impact the wider church. Furthermore, we thank our dear wives, Mary Beeke and Marla Payne, and our precious children for their heartwarming support, which makes editing a series like this one possible. We both feel that God has greatly blessed us with God-fearing wives and children who mean more to us than words can express.

Finally, and most importantly, thanks and praise must be given to our blessed triune God, the eternal Fountain of all grace and truth. By His sovereign love and mercy, and through faith in the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ, we have been “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you” (1 Peter 1:23–25 KJV).

— Joel R. Beeke and Jon D. Payne, Series Editors

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Introduction

To know that we are not alone, to come to depend upon one another, and to work together for the good of the lost and the glory of God—those are vital needs of the church in every age, but perhaps especially in these days. The letter of Paul to the Philippians, written amidst suffering, yet ringing with joy, calls for precisely this kind of Christian unity. The conviction that the life of a Christian is incomplete and immeasurably weakened when lived apart from the fellowship of the whole church, so clear in almost every paragraph of this letter, lends a contemporary relevance and urgency to its message.

The Church at Philippi

The church at Philippi had been founded by Paul himself (see Acts 16) sometime in the early 50s of the first century AD.¹ Conquered by the Romans in the second century BC, Philippi was at the time of Paul a thriving Roman colony (Acts 16:12). When Paul and his missionary team arrived in the city there was no synagogue (indicating that there were less than ten Jewish men in the city). His usual practice had been to preach in the synagogue first, and then, with a bridgehead established, to begin to reach out to the rest of the city. This was impossible at Philippi. Yet as Acts 16:13 explains, Paul and his team did find some Jewish women gathered to pray by the river, and their first convert, Lydia, came from among them.

1. Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 1.

As they made their way through the streets of the city a demon-possessed slave girl began to cry out after them, exposing their identities and risking the welfare of the missionary team as “servants of the Most High God” (Acts 16:17). The deliverance of this poor slave girl added troubles to the most inauspicious church planting core group in history! Riots soon erupted around Paul’s ministry in the city and he was quickly imprisoned. While in the Philippian jail, Paul and Silas sang hymns and praises to the Lord. Their prison cell flew open, and their jailer resolved to kill himself when he saw what he thought was a jailbreak underway on his watch. Paul and Silas did not flee, but stayed and led the jailer and his household to the Lord, baptizing them that very night (Acts 16:34); and so, along with Lydia, the middle class Jewish merchant, and the formerly demon-possessed slave girl, this blue collar Roman family joined the nucleus of the Philippian congregation. From these improbable beginnings the Philippian church grew to health and vibrancy, and a bond of pastoral love and affection was established between its members and the apostle Paul, which rings with pathos and beauty throughout his letter to them.

The Date and Occasion

Writing to the Philippian Christians sometime in the late 50s or early 60s AD,² Paul was once again imprisoned for his faith, this time in Rome. The Philippians had sent Epaphroditus to them with financial aid for their beloved father in the faith (Phil. 4:18), and now Paul sends him back to them, carrying his letter with this remarkable expression of his care and attention to their spiritual needs. His attention to them and their welfare is all the more remarkable because it now seems that the possibility of martyrdom is casting its shadow over Paul (1:20–26).

2. Silva, *Philippians*, 1.

The Message and Themes

Perhaps precisely because of Paul's sufferings and the Philippians' love for him, which are everywhere evident in the letter, the epistle to the Philippians is among the most beloved of Paul's writings. Liberally scattered references to Christian joy and exhortations to rejoice maintain an encouraging tone throughout. The *Carmen Christi*, the great hymn to Christ in Philippians 2:5–11, which so clearly and beautifully portrays the humiliation and exaltation of our Lord, brings the pervasive presence of Jesus and His gospel in this letter into laser-sharp focus at its very heart. Paul's own attitude of holy confidence in Christ and his joy that the gospel was advancing despite his own imprisonment, leaves the reader inspired and strengthened to see that whatever our own sufferings may be, joy and peace in believing are possibilities for disciples in every age.

As pastorally and devotionally useful as Philippians is, its invaluable doctrinal and theological contribution underscores its vital importance for the church in our own day. For many years the church in the West has been free of overt persecution and has occupied a position of widespread cultural influence. Yet there is some evidence that conditions are changing. The new dominance of a culture of politically correct pluralism grows more and more totalitarian and dogmatic, excluding from the public square the historic Christian voice. With echoes of the demands of ancient Greco-Roman religion, the new inclusivism of our culture will not tolerate the exclusive claims of the Christian gospel, exposing believers to hostility, disdain, and even legal sanction. In Philippians Paul models for us a godly response to persecution and suffering, writing as a man in chains, yet rejoicing in the welfare of the church and the spread of the good news (1:7, 12–18). He teaches us how to think Christianly, even heroically, about life and death in the service of Jesus Christ (1:18–26; 3:12–16).

At a time when theological precision and doctrinal profundity are plummeting in pulpits and in print, Philippians soars as it meditates on the two natures and two states of Christ (2:5–11), and helps us trace the link between Christian doctrine and Christian

living, ensuring that however high our theology soars it never fails to change how we live on the ground (2:1–4; 12–18).

Another major contribution of Philippians, so vital for the progress of the gospel in our day, is its ecclesiology. Paul is constantly pushing the Philippians, both by instruction and example, not to think individualistically, but in partnership; not merely about themselves but about one another. Life together, service together, is a major theme in the letter. The opening greeting, addressed not merely to the saints at Philippi, but with them, to their overseers and deacons (1:1), highlights the corporate nature of the church. The repeated use of the term “partnership,” or “sharing” (κοινωνία; 1:4, 7; 2:1; 3:10; 4:14–15) underscores the central motif that to be in Christ is to live in profound Christian communion, not only with the Lord but with one another. The exhortations to practice unity (1:27; 2:1–5) and the examples of ministry partnerships set before the Philippians for their emulation (2:19–30; 3:17) all reinforce the point that the Christian life is not meant to be lived in isolation. Twice Paul uses the language “striving together” for the sake of the gospel, once as an exhortation to the church in 1:27, and once as an illustration of two women who exemplify this kind of gospel partnership (4:2–3).

This, if we are forced to isolate a single phrase in Philippians, sums up the central theme of the book. The Christian life is to be lived “together,” or “side by side”; holiness is found as we pursue it “side by side”; suffering is endured and overcome “side by side”; and the gospel of grace will advance in the world and our witness (2:15–16) goes forward as we strive together for the gospel, “side by side.”

Why Read Philippians?

PHILIPPIANS 1:1–2

Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thomas Jefferson wrote twenty thousand letters in his lifetime. Our age is not his, however. Electronic media enables most of us to generate a literary output far exceeding Jefferson's in volume. But email and texting have changed the way we think about written communication. We have grown accustomed to writing short blasts of information with little concern for literary sensibilities or conventions. Written language has been reduced to text-speak in service of expediency to such an extent that some appear unable to write in any other way. I once received a job application for an important pastoral position containing emoticons and LOLs. Needless to say, the brother applying did not make it to the interview stage.

Given these developments in written communication, as we begin to study Paul's letter to the Philippians we easily feel that we are entering an alien world, governed by epistolary etiquette and literary conventions quite foreign to us. And yet, understanding the way in which the apostle Paul harnesses those conventions and makes them serve gospel ends will help us rediscover the abiding relevance of his message to an ancient church for the church of our own age.

Notice how the letter begins, “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:1). Much as any letter in the ancient Greco-Roman world might do, Paul starts by identifying the author, then the recipients, and concludes with a word of greeting. A similar pattern was common in the ancient Near East. One thinks, for example, of the letter of “Nebuchadnezzar the king, To all peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you” (Dan. 4:1). In both East and West, the form Paul is using was generally recognized. But we would be wrong to dismiss these opening verses as offering little more than customary first-century platitudes. Paul freights these customs and conventions with a precious cargo of rich theological truth which, when we see it, will help answer the question, *Why read Philippians?*

Slaves of Jesus Christ

Models of Christ-Centered Ministry

The first reason Paul gives us for attending to the message of Philippians has to do with his identity. Notice how the authors are introduced: “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ.” Actually, the word they use to describe themselves is *douloi* (δοῦλοι)—slaves. They are *slaves* of Jesus Christ. Here is Paul, the mighty apostle to the Gentiles, the great theologian-evangelist of the Greco-Roman world, and Timothy, his right-hand man, his lieutenant, a key leader in the apostolic community, sent into tough situations like the church in Ephesus with delegated apostolic authority to set the church in order. Here are two giants of the faith, figures of towering significance both then and now—and their preferred self-designation is “slaves of Jesus Christ.”

These are men who speak and act, not at their own whim or fancy, but solely at the command of the Lord Jesus Christ. Their wills have been submerged beneath His will, their motives made subservient to His purpose, their ambitions brought into alignment with His plan. You will look in vain in Philippians for a Pauline

agenda that is not at once also the agenda of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose slave Paul was.

Anyone seeking to build a reputation for himself by means of gospel ministry fails this most basic test of pastoral authenticity: we must be ready slaves to the word and will of Christ alone, wholly surrendered to His design and purpose. The gospel can never be a tool to our own self-aggrandizement, but always and only a means to the honor and renown of Jesus's name.

Instruments of Inspiration

In fact, Paul may have had more in mind as he wrote “bondservants of Jesus Christ” than the practice of slavery then current in the Roman Empire. In the Septuagint, the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament known to the apostles, the prophets were frequently described as “slaves of the Lord” (“Surely the Lord God does nothing, Unless He reveals His secret to His servants [*douloi*] the prophets” [Amos 3:7]).¹ If Paul does indeed have this Old Testament background in view, his self-identification here does more than simply highlight a universally applicable paradigm of servant-hearted ministry. Rather, like the prophetic “slaves” of the Lord, bound to convey the very words of the Lord to Israel, Paul is telling us that the mastery of Christ over His apostles extended even to their words. Paul’s message in this letter then is not the product of an overactive imagination, or of theological innovation, much less of pastoral power-politics. These are the words of a man sent to speak for Jesus by Jesus. We need to study Philippians, first and supremely, because Pauline instrumentality notwithstanding, Philippians is in a very real sense the *ipsissima verba*, the very word of Christ to us, and we cannot safely neglect it. In the words of Paul we hear the voice of Christ. The message of Philippians is the message of the Lord Jesus to us all.

1. See also 2 Kings 9:7; Ezra 9:11; Jer. 25:4; Ezek. 38:17; Dan. 9:6; Zech. 1:6; Rev. 10:7; 11:18; 22:6.

Grace and Peace

But what is that message? Look again at verse 2. Here is Paul's customary apostolic greeting: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Though this may resemble a customary opening line, it was nevertheless a striking subversion of the normal introductory formula common in secular letters of the day. They usually began with the word *chairein*, which means, simply, "Greetings!"² But here Paul has changed that salutation to *charis* (χάρις)—"grace"! Grace is, of course, Paul's great theological catchall term, used 155 times in the New Testament, especially for the demerited favor and love of God toward us, through His Son Jesus Christ. It is the disposition in God that overflows in saving beatitude to all who believe. Grace is the source and spring in the heart of God from which salvation flows.

Peace, on the other hand, almost certainly expresses the traditional Jewish greeting, *shalom*. *Shalom* in the Bible, according to Cornelius Plantinga, means

the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight.... We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a ceasefire between enemies. In the Bible, "shalom" means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.³

Shalom embraces within its scope the way things are supposed to be, the way God will one day bring things to be when the disorders and dysfunctions of sin are removed. Ephesians 2:5 reminds

2. See for example the letter from "Aesclepiades, the son of Charmagon, to Portis, the son of Peramis, greetings [*chairein*]." Cited in Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC (Waco, Tex: Word, 1983), 2.

3. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

us that we were dead in trespasses and sin, but God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, made us alive together with Christ—“by grace you have been saved.” We need grace for our spiritual death and inability before God. And we need peace for our enmity and hostility toward God. Colossians 1:20 reminds us that in Jesus God was reconciling all things to himself, whether on earth or in heaven, “having made peace through the blood of His cross.” Grace and peace provide a comprehensive response to the bankruptcy and sin of the human heart. Everything we most urgently need is here.

If *charis*-grace is the source of blessing, *shalom*-peace is the state of living blessedly. If *charis*-grace is the root of every spiritual blessing, *shalom*-peace is the sum total of them all. In pronouncing grace and peace on the Philippians, Paul is expressing far more than a customary greeting: he is indicating the target at which this letter is aimed in his readers' lives. This is much more than an empty, carelessly written “hoping you are well” sentiment. This is the summary of the total spiritual reality toward which Paul hopes to move his readers, ancient and modern, by his letter. He takes a common salutation and elevates it to a gospel benediction that leaves our ears ringing with notes of hope for sinners and saints alike.

So we need to read Philippians, first, because it is the word of Christ proclaimed through His bond-slaves to His church. But Philippians is also needed because its goal is the deepening of the work of grace in our hearts, in order that *shalom* might characterize us, our church life, home life, devotional life, and working life. Philippians is the instrument of *charis*-grace to produce *shalom*-peace in our hearts, if we will but submit to its ministry and open our hearts and lives to embrace its truths.

The Source of Saving Blessing

The third, and greatest reason to read Philippians has to do with the source from which the great comprehensive blessings of grace and peace flow. Paul writes, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Notice carefully the highest doctrine of Christ on display here. Paul associates Jesus with the Father in bestowing saving benefits on believing sinners. Those blessings that are properly the gift of God alone are properly the gift of Jesus Christ.

If we tend to focus anywhere in the introductory salutation, it is typically on “grace and peace.” But for the first readers of Paul’s letters, especially those of a Jewish background, it is the coordination of Jesus with the Father in the giving of grace and peace that was the astonishing thing. It is an implicit claim to complete deity, wholly consistent with the great confessional declaration that Jesus is “the same in substance, equal in power and glory”⁴ with the Father and the Spirit, in the fellowship of the blessed Trinity.

What does it say about us if, as we read Paul’s greeting, we dwell most on the benefits of redemption but scarcely see the glory of the Redeemer who gives them? Is it too harsh to say that at the root of this spiritual myopia is a deeply rooted idolatry that wants the blessings but not the Benefactor, that seeks the comforts but not the Comforter? “No peace without grace...” writes Matthew Henry—“no grace and peace without God our Father...no grace and peace from God our Father, but in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵

What is it that we get in the Christian gospel? Not mere blessings, not graces, not benefits. To think only in those terms is to default to a fundamentally pagan conception in which the worshipper serves the deity in order to obtain what she feels she needs. And yet how easily we slip into that mindset! Over and over again in the course of pastoral ministry I have heard sincere Christians express their hopes for a positive outcome amidst some trial or another: “I know God won’t let me down.” When we speak like that we betray a subtle and often unexamined assumption that God owes us, that He is somehow in our debt, that the good things we long for are ours *by right*. But the Christian gospel is not a mechanism by which

4. Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 6.

5. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 2321.

to leverage blessings from the hands of God. The Christian gospel is the good news that by faith in Jesus Christ God gives us *Himself*. It is Christ and all His benefits—it is fellowship with God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ that we receive in the gospel. “This is the differentia of Christianity,” writes Martyn Lloyd Jones, “this is the element that changes everything. It is the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . There is no such thing as a Christianity apart from the Lord Jesus Christ; there is no blessing from God to man in a Christian sense except in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁶

Grace and peace are not abstractions, as though to live the Christian life were to enjoy *something*, rather than *someone*. The blessings of grace and peace, in the end, make sense only when they are understood as shorthand for the complete reality of Christian communion with God the Father by faith in Jesus Christ His Son, in the enabling of the Holy Spirit. What we get in the gospel is Jesus. What we get is God. Grace is God giving Himself to us that we might be swept up into participation in the unending harmony of God’s own communion with Himself in the fellowship of the Trinity, which is peace—unending and uninterrupted *shalom*—in its fullest expression.

Why attend to the message of Philippians? Because it is the word of Christ to us. Because it is the instrument of grace and peace among us. Because it displays the glory of the triune God and invites us into fellowship with Him.

6. D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Ephesians, Vol. 1: God’s Ultimate Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 42.