

Philippians 1:3-11 I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴Every time I pray for all of you, I always pray with joy, ⁵because of your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am convinced of this very thing: that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁷I am equally convinced that it is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I have you in my heart, for both in my chains and in my defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all share in this grace with me. ⁸Yes, God is my witness of how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹And I pray that your love may still increase more and more in knowledge and every insight. ¹⁰This will result in your approval of the things that really matter, so that you will be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

When you read a fairy tale like Cinderella or Little Red Riding Hood they usually begin with the phrase “Once upon a time...” They aren’t intended to be from any point in history. It’s all just imaginary. Or you might think of the opening crawl to all the Star Wars movies. It begins with a blank, black screen with blue letters that read, “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far, away...”

Today people want to lump the Scriptures into that same category. It’s fiction. It’s little stories to teach children that they should behave. But look at the Gospel lesson for today. Luke doesn’t say “Once upon a time...” He was writing to a man named Theophilus so he gave exact times and dates that he would have been well aware of. John the Baptist began his work in the 15th year of the reign of Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar. Luke lists all the rulers in the area at that time. These are real events. This is real history.

We have further proof that all of this is real in this lesson for today. Paul was writing to real people in a real city in Greece. The message about Jesus was so real that Paul was willing to suffer for it to the point of being beaten and imprisoned. Now he writes to people he dearly loves to encourage them in the faith. Today we hear A Pastor’s Advent Prayer for His People. It is a prayer of thanks and a prayer for love.

Paul begins this letter by writing, **“I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴Every time I pray for all of you, I always pray with joy.”** His letter to the Philippians has been called his epistle of joy because he uses words like joy and rejoice over and over again. That’s particularly interesting when you remember what happened to him in Philippi. It wouldn’t exactly fill me with good memories.

When Paul and Silas arrived there they found a slave girl who was demon possessed. Her masters wanted her to stay that way because it enabled her to do fortune telling. God enabled them to cast the demon out of her, setting her free from her suffering. They say that no good deed goes unpunished. Her masters dragged them to the courts and made up some charges against them. The leaders of the town beat them violently and had them thrown into prison.

But Paul wasn’t remembering that. He was remembering the members of that congregation whom he loved with the heart of Christ—we’ll talk more about that in a bit—and who also loved him back. When I think about my ministry, I choose not to remember the bad times, the hurtful things people have said and done. I prefer to remember God’s people and all the fruits of faith they produced over the years.

Paul talks about one thing in particular that fills his heart with thanks and joy. It is **“⁵because of your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.”** Unfortunately when we talk about “fellowship” we tend to talk about what we can’t do with other church bodies that have turned away from what the Scripture says to one extent or another.

But when the Scripture uses that word it is overwhelmingly positive. Paul thinks of all the ways that the believers in Philippi had worked together with him to proclaim Christ crucified. He might have thought about Lydia, one of the first people he met there. God had blessed her with some wealth so she invited Paul and Silas to use her home as their base of operations. He thought about the many times they sent financial support to him over the years, even though they weren’t the wealthiest congregation in the world.

That’s the kind of thing that makes me thankful too. I see the people who are willing to spend a lot of time serving this congregation to make sure that Gospel ministry is carried out here—whether it’s our teachers, the Church Council, our organists, our secretary or someone who cleans up around here or shovels the snow. They aren’t being forced to do that. They do it for their Lord and his Word. Most people will never see it, but their Lord does and that’s all that matters.

Paul has even more reasons to be thankful, **“⁷I am equally convinced that it is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I have you in my heart, for both in my chains and in my defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all share in this grace with me.”** What are these “chains” that Paul is talking about? Well, this letter is one of Paul’s prison epistles along with Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

When he wrote those letters he was under house arrest in Rome while he was awaiting trial before Caesar himself. He was there for roughly two years. Remember it all started with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem making up charges against him. They even plotted to murder him. Thankfully, that plan was foiled. Still, he spent two years in prison in Caesarea before he even got to Rome. But the Philippians didn't turn their backs on him. Instead they ramped up their support for him.

Now I don't think that any of us have ever been violently beaten and thrown into prison for years just for talking about Jesus. I think I would have heard about that. But every believer's life will be affected by sin. We will all bear a cross for Christ whenever living like a believer contradicts what society wants us to do. Those times shouldn't drive us apart. They should bring us together. We can support and encourage each other because we're all facing the same challenges.

Paul has one last reason to be thankful, **"I am convinced of this very thing: that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."** Notice that he didn't say that he began the good work in them. God did. True, Paul brought them the Word and Sacraments, but he wasn't the one who brought them to faith or sustained them in the faith. God does that.

God did the same thing for all of you. Some of you I have baptized. Most of you I have not. But regardless of who baptized you the Holy Spirit worked through it to create faith in your hearts. I've preached the Word, but I can't make you believe it. The Holy Spirit can and does. I don't make the bread and wine into also Christ's body and blood. God does that through his Word.

If God has done that for you already—and for some of you he has been doing that before I was even born—I know for a fact that God will keep working through the Word and Sacraments to keep you as his own, even once I'm long gone. We don't have to worry about being ready for Jesus' return on the Last Day. God has already made us ready to stand in his presence. Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

Today we hear A Pastor's Advent Prayer for His People. It is a prayer of thanks and a prayer for love.

Paul shows what we mean by a "pastor's heart" when he writes, **"Yes, God is my witness of how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus."** If you want to break the heart of a pastor, keep him away from his people. Paul would have given anything to be able to visit them again, but he had been locked up for years with no idea of when or if he might be released.

The closest I can come to that is the Covid era. The nice part about it is that all my children were able to be at home for an extended period of time. The bad thing is that I couldn't be with my people. I remember going over to an empty church building on the day before Easter and recording a brief service that I would post on the Internet. The worst for me is that I couldn't visit the shut-ins, the people who needed me the most.

I wish I could describe what a pastor's heart feels like but you have to be a pastor to experience it. Paul calls it, **"the affection of Christ Jesus."** Christ loved us all so much that he was willing to come here to do anything, to suffer everything, even to die on a cross, so that we could be God's children now and forever. I can't do that. I'm no Savior. But the same love that motivated Christ, motivates me and every faithful pastor.

When I first came here there were some difficult issues that needed to be dealt with. Ron Nichol apologized for flinging me directly into the fire. I smiled and said, "When I accepted the call, I assumed that Satan lived here too." I didn't come here because I assumed that there would be fewer problems. If anything there would be more, but they would be problems that God has equipped and trained me to handle.

Remember that when the Bible talks about love, it's not just a feeling. It's an action. Jesus didn't just say, "I love you." He lived, died, and rose again for you. Paul shows one way that the believers could show their love for God, **"And I pray that your love may still increase more and more in knowledge and every insight."** It's not that they didn't know anything about God. He was just encouraging them to grow.

I have the same encouragement for you. I'm guessing that in your job, they want you to have some continuing education. If you work with computers, technology is constantly on the move. There may be some new tool you can use or building technique to try out. That's why I go to things like Pastors' conferences. Just because I have degrees with genuine Latin words on them hung in my office, it doesn't mean I'm done learning.

Do you know how I can immediately tell if someone doesn't know enough of God's Word? It's when they tell me they know enough. It's when they brag about how many years they have attended here. It's like the joke I told before, "Jesus loves me, this I know. And that is all I want to know." Except it's not a joking matter. There's nothing Satan loves more than a Christian who believes they don't need all this Bible stuff anymore. They're an easy target.

Paul gives us a good reason to grow in knowledge and insight, **"This will result in your approval of the things that really matter, so that you will be pure and blameless for the day of Christ."** If you aren't in

God's Word regularly there is no way that you can make the right decisions day by day. I'm not talking about decisions like, "Do I have a peanut butter sandwich for lunch or ham and cheese?"

It's like when you ask yourself, "My neighbor doesn't know about Jesus. What should I do about that?" Or, "If I take this job, I'll make more money, but it means that I'll only rarely get to be in church. Is that trade-off I should be making?" Or how about this situation, "I really like the girl I'm dating, but she wants absolutely nothing to do with church." Day after day we are confronted with situations like these. God's Word is the only thing that can enable us to navigate them in a God-pleasing way.

I'll let Paul finish his sentence, "¹⁰**This will result in your approval of the things that really matter, so that you will be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.**" Fruits of righteousness are fruits of faith. They are the good, God-pleasing things we do motivated by our Savior's love for us.

Earlier I talked about some of the things that people do on behalf of the church. Those are certainly fine examples of fruits of righteousness. There are so many others. When parents faithfully raise their children, teaching them from little on how to pray, setting Christian examples for them on a daily basis—I can't imagine finer fruits of righteousness than that. The way you carry yourself, the way you talk, the way you think show that you are putting God first. You live for him.

Then we will be "**pure and blameless for the day of Christ.**" God's Word and Sacraments make us pure and blameless in God's sight. They keep us pure and blameless in God's sight. They motivate us to produce fruits of faith that show the whole world that God has made us pure and blameless. As we make final preparations for the Christmas season to remember our Savior's birth once again, we also prepare for his return on the Last Day. We will see him with our own eyes and live with him forever in glory.

Today we hear A Pastor's Advent Prayer for His People. It is a prayer of thanks and a prayer for love. In his final letter before he would die for his Savior, the Apostle Peter wrote, "**To be sure, we were not following cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the powerful appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.**" The Scripture is not just a story. It is real and living history—the history of God's great love for humanity. We are reminded of that at Christmas and we will see it when our Lord returns again.