

# OpenTheo

## Philippians: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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## Transcript

The Epistle to the Philippians was written to Christians in the small city of Philippi, a Roman colony in the region of Macedonia. Its inhabitants, on account of its being a Roman colony, enjoyed certain privileges. Paul first visited the city in Acts chapter 16, where he and Silas encountered Lydia, a Gentile God-fearer, and some other praying women.

Lydia and her household were baptized, and a small church seems to have been formed, seemingly with Lydia and her household at its heart. After Paul delivered a slave girl from a spirit of divination, they had been thrown in prison, where the Philippian jailer and his family were converted. Paul writes this letter from prison.

Where exactly Paul was in prison is a matter of debate. Arguments have been advanced for Ephesus or Caesarea, but I think the strongest case is still that for Rome. Paul was likely writing in the early 60s.

By this time, it would have been about a dozen years or more since he first visited the city of Philippi. Within the letter, he gives the Philippians news of his situation, commends Epaphroditus to them, and expresses his appreciation for their generous support. The epistle is addressed from both Paul and Timothy.

Their two names are alongside each other. Paul is the author, however. It differs from most other Pauline greetings by not referring to Paul as an apostle.

The letter is addressed to the saints at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons. This suggests that by this point, Philippi has a rather more developed church structure. However, we should beware of assuming too formalized an order, or too technical a meaning to such terms at this point.

The overseers were likely men especially responsible as guardians of the congregation, while the deacons were likely persons especially charged with service in practical matters on behalf of the church. As usual, Paul wishes the recipients of his letter grace and peace. These terms should not be read as mere general pleasantries, as they come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The grace is the grace that God shows in the gospel of his Son, and the peace is the peace that arises from that. The epistle is addressed from Paul and Timothy, but immediately Paul lapses into the first person singular, making apparent that he is the sole author. As Paul typically does in his letters, he gives detailed thanks for the people to whom he is writing, and for what God is accomplishing in and through them.

As Mourner Hooker observes, his thanksgiving expresses joy, gratitude, confidence, affection, and longing for them in succession. The memory of them is a source of joy to him, and a spur to thankful prayer. For Paul, one of the great benefits of seeing God at work in other people and their situations is the way in which it encourages many to express thanksgiving.

He speaks of their partnership in the gospel. While this might refer to the way that the Philippians supported him in their prayers, and some of them served alongside him, it is likely that Paul has in mind chiefly the particular financial support that the Philippian church had given him in his labours. Paul writes of this more directly in chapter 4 verses

15-19.

In chapter 4, as here in chapter 1, Paul makes clear that he regards such giving less as something given to him personally, than as a partnership in his mission, as a herald of the gospel message. They will receive their reward, not in thanks and indebtedness from Paul himself, but from the hand of God. He expresses his confidence in the fact that what God first began in that small prayer group by the river in Philippi with Lydia, would be brought to a glorious completion on the last day, when Christ will be revealed.

Paul's joy, gratitude, and confidence in the Philippians are appropriate, as he shares with them in grace and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. It isn't just a sharing in the experiences of struggle and persecution, but a sharing in the reception of the gift of God in Christ, through and in those things, and sharing in the mission of Christ that they are all labouring in together. Ultimately, the suffering we experience in our Christian calling is sharing in God's grace, and in the fate of the gospel itself, which prospers in and through us as God has granted us to be partakers in its mission.

Paul's feelings for the Philippians are intense, and he longs for them all with an affection that comes from Christ himself, not just an affection of human friendship, but an affection that we feel towards those to whom we are joyfully united in the Messiah. He concludes this introductory section of his letter by expressing his prayer for the Philippians. His prayer is for their growth, a growth that flows from the abounding of their love, both for God and for others.

This love should develop into a greater maturity as they grow in knowledge and insight, so that they are able to perceive and approve those things that are good. As a result of such abounding love and deepening moral discernment, they will be prepared for the day of Christ's revelation and judgment, pure and blameless before him, bearing a rich harvest of God's work within them in a way that brings glory and praise to God. A question to consider.

How is Paul's understanding of his and the Philippians' participation in the Gospel and its fate a source of encouragement, joy and confidence? In Paul's epistles, the message of what God is doing for and through other Christians in other localities is frequently related as a matter of importance. It doesn't just matter that God is doing things. The fact that people are spreading the news and talking about it matters too.

This is especially true as such reports are transformed into prayers of thanksgiving, as the word of the success of God's word in various persons and locations returns to him in the form of praise. Paul is often eager to stir up such reports into a godly buzz about what God is accomplishing, so that Christians will become emboldened in their witness, and so that the work of God's word would yield a richer harvest of praise from those whose ears its victories reach. In the second half of Philippians chapter 1, Paul discusses the way in which the news of his own imprisonment has itself become a means of the

Gospel's spread.

In particular, it had become known throughout the entire imperial guard, and to others of the establishment, that Paul's imprisonment was literally in Christ. Paul's imprisonment wasn't just for Christ, but in Christ. Not merely something occurring as a result of Paul's witness for Christ, but a way in which Paul himself was manifestly participating in Christ.

By imprisoning this troublesome Jewish teacher, the Romans set up the conditions for the report of his master, Jesus the Messiah, to be spread throughout the palace guard. The message of Jesus was being spread through the gossip of the soldiers, who presumably saw something different and remarkable about this particular prisoner. And Paul's imprisonment and suffering at their hands was a way in which the fact that his life was lived in his crucified Lord, shone with a brightness that could not be ignored.

All of this created wonderful new opportunities for the Gospel message, and illustrated Christ's glorious way of achieving his great victories under the mask of defeats. Who would believe that the imprisonment of one of his leading heralds would be one of the ways in which Jesus would cause the message of his lordship, and his gracious forgiveness, to penetrate so deeply into the establishment that executed him. But Paul's imprisonment was not only producing fruit among the Roman guards.

His example was emboldening other Christians to bear courageous witness, even in the teeth of the threat of similar imprisonment. The report of Christ's grace to Paul in his imprisonment, robbed the threats of the authorities of the fear that they would typically instil. Ironically, some of the people who had been emboldened to speak, were doing so out of bad motives, wanting to cause Paul distress or to build little kingdoms for themselves, now that their rival Paul was no longer able to keep them in check.

They weren't preaching a fundamentally false message like the Judaizers, but they were preaching out of bad or mixed motives. However, whatever their intentions, the word of Christ was spreading through them nonetheless. If Christ could make the word of his kingdom spread in the gossip of Roman guards, he could spread it just as effectively through the words of petty and proud preachers.

Just as in the cross itself, the intentions of the enemies of Christ will lead them to become the unwitting ministers of his victory. Not all of the preachers Paul mentioned, however, were of such a character. Some, rather than viewing Paul's imprisonment as their chance to get ahead in a rivalry that they had with him, recognised that Paul had been appointed to imprisonment by the Lord for the service of the gospel itself.

Christ had put him in prison as a means of advancing his kingdom. Recognising the sovereignty of Christ over the intentions of men, and what Christ was accomplishing through the situation, Paul can respond to what would seem to almost any human being as a severe setback, not with despair, but with rejoicing. Rejoicing in prison and in

suffering is one of the marks of the early church.

Paul can also rejoice as he is assured that, through the prayers of the Philippians and others, and the work of the Spirit, the situation will yield his deliverance, or salvation. The deliverance that he expects is a divine vindication, and he alludes to Job chapter 13 verses 15-16 here. Though he slay me, I will hope in him, yet I will argue my ways to his face.

This will be my salvation, that the godless shall not come before him. Paul shares this confidence in God, a confidence that will not be shaken by death itself. Paul is looking to his approaching trial, but looking beyond the human court before which he will stand, to a greater court, from which he is awaiting a glorious vindication, a vindication achieved through the petitions of the Philippians and others, and the advocate of the Holy Spirit.

More than anything, he desires Christ to be honoured in his body, in his current physical existence, whether this takes the form of life or death. While most would look at the trial that Paul would soon face with great concern over whether it would yield a death sentence, because Paul is looking beyond it, he can speak about the alternatives of release or execution with a measure of ambivalence. Whatever the human court determines in his case, it is the verdict of the heavenly court that he is awaiting, and he can confidently place himself in the hands of its judge, assured of the salvation that he will bring.

The choice that Paul faces is between life and death. For Paul, living is opportunity to serve and exalt Christ by his labours, to minister to his people, and to extend his kingdom. We might here recall Galatians 2.20 I have been crucified with Christ.

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. On the one hand, being at home in the body, as Paul observes in 2 Corinthians 5.6, involves being away from the Lord.

Death would not merely mean a release from Paul's troubles, but would bring a new intimacy and closeness with Christ in the intermediate state, while awaiting the final resurrection. For Paul's purely personal interest, this would be preferable. However, Paul believes that Christ still has a purpose for him to serve, in ministering to the Philippians, so that they might grow further in their faith, and have reason to thank and glorify Christ in his release and his visiting of them again.

Whatever happens, Paul knows that the progress of the gospel and the glory of Christ is the ultimate end. The one thing Paul is concerned about is that the Philippians conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel, whether he is released to minister to them again, or is restrained from visiting them by continued imprisonment or death, Paul desires to hear of their united endurance, bound together by a common struggle for the

truth of the gospel. They should be standing firm in the one spirit, God's Holy Spirit, and united in the one mindset of Christ, fearlessly facing their adversaries and opponents.

Such fearless behaviour would actually evidence the truth of the message of judgment and salvation the Philippians proclaimed. The more confidently the Philippians faced persecution, the more that their persecutors would be led to question their own position, suspecting that confidence in the judgment upon the enemies of Christ, of which the Philippian Christians spoke, was the only explanation for such conduct. The Philippians could draw confidence from the fearlessness of their own number, seeing ordinary men and women displaying a courage in the face of death and persecution that could only be explained by the work of the Spirit, and would, as they had already been by the example of Paul, be emboldened in their own witness and behaviour.

All of this would be evidence to them and their opponents that God was at work. One of the ways that the lives of the saints bear witness, both encouraging and convicting us, is through their remarkable conduct that testifies to their recognition of something with the eyes of faith that exceeds fleshly perception. They display virtues and rise to a stature that is astonishing, precisely as they witness something that others don't see.

However, even when people don't see what they see, their lives themselves bear witness to the existence of such a reality, as they are clearly living in terms of a greater horizon, one that elicits virtues from them that are both glorious and utterly paradoxical in terms of the immediate horizons that everyone else witnesses. Paul concludes this chapter with a remarkable statement. For the sake of Christ, it had been granted to the Philippians not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for his sake.

Our very faith is something granted to us by God, who opened our eyes to his truth so that we might respond to him. Apart from God's work of grace towards us in Christ, we would not have any capacity to respond. Beyond this, however, we have been granted to suffer for Christ's sake, knowing the fellowship of Christ's suffering, and in our suffering for him, rendering some thanksgiving for the immensity of his suffering for us.

In chapter 3 verses 10-11, Paul will speak of sharing his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. A question to consider, how does Paul's confidence in Christ's power and rule in the spread of the gospel and its work inform his approach to the many adversaries of, and obstacles to, the gospel? How many examples can you find of these adversaries and obstacles in this chapter, and how do we see the confidence of Paul in the gospel in the face of them? The first half of Philippians chapter 2 is one of the most famous passages in all of Paul's writings. Many regard verses 5-11 as a sort of a Christological hymn.

Although it clearly has a pronounced poetic character, whether or not it was actually a hymn is uncertain, and there are various competing theories of the hymn's supposed origin. Paul begins the section by appealing to the Philippians. Do they enjoy

encouragement in Christ? Do they find comfort in his love? Do they know fellowship in the Spirit? Do they know affection and compassion in him? Paul doesn't make the source of this encouragement, comfort, fellowship, affection and compassion plain.

However, while the primary source is clearly Christ, it probably also includes what they experience from brothers and sisters in Christ too. If they do have these things, they should go even further, and make Paul's joy complete. They have already brought him great joy, as he has made clear, but they could raise his joy to even greater heights.

They can do this by pursuing unity of mind and love with each other. By mind, Paul is referring to mindset and attitude. In unpacking what this united mindset should involve, Paul contrasts selfish ambition and conceit to a humility that puts others ahead of themselves, and which is mindful of and concerned for others' well-being.

The success of the Christian understanding of virtue can be seen in part by the fact that we are probably not startled by this exhortation from Paul. In the Roman culture of the Philippians, humility would not be regarded as such a virtue. Rather, it would be regarded as weak and servile.

To many minds, this passage is the very height of the sort of slave morality that Friedrich Nietzsche identified as subverting the master morality of nobility, strength of will, pride, power and courage. Until we have some grasp of the mindset of the typical Roman, the shock of Paul's teaching here won't hit us. This passage is a direct assault upon the fundamental morality of the society Paul was living in.

The importance of Christians recognising being attentive to, serving and not exerting their strength at the expense of others is a recurring theme in Paul's writing. Rather than vaunting themselves over others, pursuing their own rights, advancing themselves ahead of others, acting without regard for others, or putting others down to privilege themselves, the Philippians are to act out of a humility with regard to themselves and an attention to the value of others. Just how revolutionary this vision of morality was is difficult for us to grasp in a society that has inherited the world that it transformed.

The historian Tom Holland has recently written about the way in which the entire world of Rome was built upon systemic exploitation and brutality and an extreme masked morality. Millions were killed and many millions more enslaved and that was something to boast in. It was a sign of might, a sign of the Roman will to power achieving its ends.

Sex, for instance, was about the free Roman man and the eclipse of the concerns of the parties that they exerted their dominance over. Paul's teaching here goes for the jugular of such a society, rejecting and disqualifying it outright. In this message and the good news of a king that, as we will see, exemplifies this humility and meekness, this entire Roman way of perceiving the world would be brought down.

In the section, or perhaps the hymn that follows, Paul presents the example of Jesus himself, an example in which, as we will soon see, humility is presented as something divine. You can imagine the Roman man responding to the notion of humility as a virtue by claiming that such a virtue might perhaps have a place for slaves and women who need to put some positive spin upon their weakness and loneliness. By suggesting that humility is a virtue, the unavoidable state of servility can be made somewhat less alienating.

However, the free Roman man is above such morality. He has strength, power, status, and humility is just for those who lack such things. However, the biblical understanding of humility is not just the lack of power, will or greatness.

Humility can be seen in God himself, as God displays his power and greatness, not in self-aggrandizement, but in service of the weak and dependent. In Jesus the Messiah, the Lord of the Universe is revealed to be a humble God. When we are called to adopt the mindset of the humble, we are not being called to act as slaves, crafting a vision of morality around the unavoidable condition of our powerlessness and our resentful frustration at the master morality of those who lord over us, but as those who are imitating our master, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, following in his path.

The hymn, if we are to call it that, divides into two parts, verses 6-8 tell of Christ's humiliation, and verses 9-11 of his exaltation overall. The focus of the first section is upon Christ's voluntary humiliation. From the outset we can see that Paul is working with an extremely high Christology.

Christ pre-exists his birth. We have hints of this elsewhere in Paul, in places like 2 Corinthians 8-9. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

However, it is at its clearest here and in Colossians 1-15-20. Christ isn't just sent by the Father, he voluntarily empties himself and comes. Various commentators have suggested that Paul is drawing a contrast between Christ and Adam, much as he does in Romans 5. The connection with the servant of Isaiah that some have proposed is weaker, if it is present at all.

Adam had been made in the image of God, and had grasped at equality with God in the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. By contrast, Christ, being the very image of God, did not regard the equality with God that he already possessed as something to be exploited, or used for his own advantage. The translation here is difficult, and even when scholars agree with the general sense of the passage, the more precise sense is a matter of some lively debate.

The translation in the form of God might remind us of Colossians 1-15. He is the image of the invisible God. The word the ESV translates as a thing to be grasped is even more



debated.

Some have suggested, for instance, that the word translated as robbery, or a thing to be grasped, or something to be exploited, might have a more particular reference to something to be exploited for rape and robbery. At the very least, this would sharpen the contrast between Christ and the false gods of the pagans, whose divine power was used precisely for such self-aggrandizement and exploitation of others, often involving rape of human women, as in the case of Zeus, on numerous occasions. This is what divine power looked like to the Greeks and the Romans.

Christ stands out, then, not only from Adam, but also from the false gods and idols. While Adam was made in God's image, but sought to grasp at equality with God, Christ had equality with God, yet did not exploit it. Rather, he voluntarily forwent all his prerogatives and assumed the position of a slave, someone without any of the honour that he possessed by right.

Many have speculated about what it would have meant for Jesus to empty himself, an act referred to as his kenosis. Some have argued that he gave up his divine power and other divine attributes, ceasing to be truly God in order that he might become truly man. This, of course, must be rejected, not merely on the grounds of Christian orthodoxy, but also on the basis of a proper reading of this passage.

The full force of Paul's teaching cannot be appreciated unless we recognise that Christ's emptying of himself was, far from a departure from divinity, a true manifestation of it. Christ, who was in the form of God, took the form of a slave. The seeming contrast could not be sharper, but the contrast is a revelatory one, and isn't fundamentally opposing.

The character of God is revealed in Christ's assuming the character of a slave. What the form of a servant involved becomes clearer when we are told that he was born in the likeness of men and was found in human form. However, this wasn't the measure of the depth of Christ's self-humbling.

He, like a slave, took the path of obedience. The path of obedience to the cross itself, practically the most humiliating death imaginable. The annihilation of all dignity, status, honour, glory, belonging, all these sorts of things.

In his disobedience, Adam had taken from the tree to grasp at equality with God. In his obedience, Christ went to the tree, not merely to reverse Adam's action, but also to reveal what God is truly like. In John's Gospel, for instance, it is in the cross that Christ is lifted up.

This is the beginning of his glorification. God is not as we expected him to be. The hymn concludes with a movement of exaltation that responds to the downward movement of the first half.

Christ did not exalt himself, but God highly exalted him. Indeed, God exalted him to the greatest degree imaginable. His name is above every name.

Every knee everywhere must bow before him, and every tongue must confess his lordship. The name that Christ receives is the name that is above every name. There is only one such name, the name of God himself.

In his exaltation, Jesus' divinity is openly proclaimed. When we baptise, for instance, we do so in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Not three different names, but the one name of the Triune God.

Of course, Jesus doesn't become divine in his exaltation. Rather, his divinity is openly declared. And as it is declared, the way of the cross that led to that exaltation is declared to be the way of God himself.

In bestowing the name that is above every name, upon Jesus, the Father sets him forth as the one to whom the worship of all is due. Every knee must bow, and every tongue confess. There is an expression taken from the Old Testament here.

Isaiah 45, verses 18-23 reads, For thus says the Lord who created the heavens, He is God, who formed the earth and made it, he established it, he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret in a land of darkness.

I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, seek me in vain. I the Lord speak the truth, I declare what is right. Assemble yourselves and come, draw near together, you survivors of the nations.

They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a God that cannot save. Declare and present your case, let them take counsel together. Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour, there is none beside me.

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return. To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.

The one true God was unique in creating the world. The one true God is unique in his rule over the world. And the one true God will demonstrate his uniqueness over against the idols through the great salvation that he will bring about.

This is what the Lord is speaking of in this passage in Isaiah. And the proof of all of this is that the day will come when every knee will bow to him and every tongue will swear allegiance to him. Read against such a background, Philippians chapter 2 could not be more astonishing.

Paul's startling message is that the uniqueness of God has been revealed in Christ. And if that wasn't remarkable enough, it has been revealed in the self-emptying way of the cross. God will not give his glory to another, but the Father is glorified in his Son who lives and reigns with him in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

Glory and God-likeness is found not in self-aggrandizement, but in humility and in the path of service to others. If the Philippians take on the mindset that Paul wishes them to, they will be formed according to the character of the Lord of all, according to the character of God himself. A question to consider, how might knowing that God's true character is seen in Jesus challenge some of our preconceptions about God and about virtue? The second half of Philippians chapter 2 continues the point that Paul has been making since chapter 1 verse 27.

Paul is concerned that the Philippians live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, in a manner that is fitting to the grace that they have received and to the master that they serve. In the first half of Philippians chapter 2, Paul put forward Christ as an example of the mindset that they should follow, showing humility in the way that they treat each other, not seeking their own advantage or engaging in self-aggrandizement, but taking concern for each other and pursuing a loving unity. When we talk about salvation, our discussions of it tend to be dominated by the big question of whether someone is in or out.

As a result, we often find ourselves wrong-footed by the teaching on the subject in the New Testament. Here, for instance, when Paul talks about working out your own salvation with fear and trembling, the instinctive response from many is fear of works righteousness and the idea of earning one's own salvation. However, a very great deal that salvation involves isn't concerned with the question of whether one is in or out, with how one gets in, or even whether you need to act in a particular way to stay in.

Rather, salvation is a term that relates to a far broader reality, and we can lose a very great deal when we are simply narrowly fixated upon whether we are in or not, immensely important though that concern may be in its proper place. Perhaps we could compare this to a child who has been wonderfully delivered from life on the streets by being adopted into a rich and loving family. By the formal process of adoption, they become part of the family.

They are now in. However, the whole point of adoption is not the bare formality of being technically in, but the rich reality of fellowship, love, security, dignity, and authorisation that the adopted child enjoys as they live out what it means to be in. A child that was very concerned to know whether he was technically adopted, but largely ignored his adoptive parents, showed no eagerness to join the family at the meal table, and consistently behaved in a stubborn and rebellious manner, would be making a mockery of the reality of adoption, whatever his technical status.

Likewise, the content of salvation is not so much the narrow concern of whether or not we are technically in, conceived of as little more than a matter of knowing that we aren't going to be eternally alienated from God. It is the enjoyment of true peace and communion with God, living as those engaged in our father's business as sons and daughters of God, experiencing the renewal of our desires and wills by the work of the indwelling spirit, knowing relief from guilty conscience in full and free forgiveness, living in actual fellowship with God and our neighbours, etc. etc.

This is what being in is all about, and we get to experience all of this now to some degree through the down payment of the spirit, in a foretaste of what we will one day know in fuller measure. Here Paul is concerned to impress upon the Philippians the importance of entering into the fullness of the salvation that they have been granted in Christ. This is something that they need to work out.

We should all be growing in our knowledge of God's salvation, and maturing in our living it out over time. We should be living in ways that express the release from bondage that we have been given in Christ. Paul doesn't want the Philippians merely to do this for his inspection, so that he won't rebuke them.

In his absence, as well as in his presence, this should be something that they are pursuing for its own sake. If we have besetting sins in our lives, we should be working out our salvation there. If we have struggles with fear, despair or discouragement, we should be working out our salvation there.

If we lack assurance, we should be working out our salvation there. If we are alienated from a brother or sister, we should be working out our salvation there. If our love for Christ is weak, we should be working out our salvation there.

If we do not find joy in meditating upon the things of God, or if our prayer life is lacking, we should be working out our salvation there. None of this is done as those who are trying to earn our standing with God. We have been given that.

Rather, our concern must be to receive most fully the gift of God's grace that we have been given, to enter into the very fullest possession of it. We must do all of this with fear and trembling. As those who have received the most incredible mercy and grace, and as those who are living in the presence of a holy God, the fear and trembling does not result from the doubtfulness of God's favour towards us, from the possibility that God is looking for a chance to trip us up, or to withdraw his grace as soon as we fail.

No, as Paul goes on to argue, we should act in fear and trembling as God himself is at work in us. God's grace is active within us to enable us both to desire what is good and to do it. God is restoring us in, and enabling us to grow in, truthful ways of life.

We must be concerned not to receive his gifts in vain, not to treat the grace of our

Creator as a light thing. We must treasure and pursue his grace, seeking to enter into the fullest measure of it. Mourner Hooker suggests that Paul plays off the background of Moses' farewell discourses in Deuteronomy here, in a way that contrasts with Moses' teaching to the unfaithful Israelites.

Moses had compared the Israelites' behaviour in his presence with the way that they would behave when he left the scene, in chapter 31, verse 27 of Deuteronomy. Paul's statement to the Philippians in verse 12 is in many ways the complete inverse of this. Again, Moses describes the Israelites in Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 5. They are a crooked and twisted generation.

The Philippians, however, are not blemished members of a crooked and twisted generation, but children of God without blemish, in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation. At the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the unfaithfulness of Israel was a tragic reality that would doom them to experience the full measure of the curse of the covenant. However, there was the promise held out that, after the curse of the covenant had come upon them, the Lord would circumcise their hearts and the hearts of their children, so that as God restored them, they would serve him aright.

Perhaps Paul is echoing and inverting the text of Deuteronomy, because he wants the Philippians to recognise that, in the new covenant, which they are experiencing here and now, all of this is taking place. The Philippians are charged to do all things without grumbling or disputing. Grumbling and disputing were, of course, the most characteristic sins of the wilderness generation.

Unlike the wilderness generation, who failed to enter into possession of the salvation that God held out to them, the Philippians must hold fast to the word of life, persevering in the way of Christ, so that on the day of the Lord, when our salvation is consummated in Christ's unveiling, Paul's efforts on their behalf would not turn out to have been in vain. As they conduct themselves in a righteous manner, holding fast to Christ's word of life, they will shine like lights in the world, displaying this truth to others. Paul's statements to the Israelites were given in the context of his farewell discourse, and here Paul's thoughts seem to turn to the possibility of his own departure in martyrdom.

Paul presents his possible martyrdom as a sort of drink offering upon the offering of the Philippians' faith. Together, Paul and the Philippians are engaged in an act of sacrificial worship in their response to God's grace in the Gospel. Even if Paul's death is imminent, the worthiness of making such a sacrifice gives him cause to rejoice, a rejoicing that he requests that the Philippians join him in.

Paul's hope is to send Timothy to the Philippians soon. Timothy is Paul's sheliach, the one who personally represents Paul where Paul himself cannot be. As such, Timothy participates in the exercise of Paul's apostolic ministry.

He is the co-author of Epistles, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon. He is Paul's personal emissary, as we see in Acts 19.22 and 1 Timothy 1.3. He is the one who served Paul, so that Paul could give himself to his primary task of preaching without any distraction. Timothy participated directly in Paul's exercise of his apostolic power.

Paul and Timothy are a pair, bound together in a single apostolic mission. On occasions, the distinction between them is made plain. Only Paul is the apostle proper, while on others their alignment and association is stressed.

Timothy is a co-worker, helper and sharer in Paul's calling. Relative to the churches to which they were ministering, Timothy was to be treated as a bearer of Paul's own authority. However, relative to Paul, Timothy was a subordinate, without an independent commission of his own, but rather a share in Paul's.

The relationship between Paul and Timothy is exceptionally close, and Paul speaks of Timothy as his own son. This language is not merely that of emotional closeness, but of representation. The son represents the father, his authority, his presence and his interests.

It also points to a relationship similar to that which pertained between Old Testament leaders and prophets and their shaliaks. In Numbers 13.16 we see that Joshua's name was given to him by Moses, who also laid his hands on Joshua. In Deuteronomy 34.9 a similar relationship exists between Elijah and Elisha.

Elisha receives a double portion of Elijah's spirit, the inheritance appropriate to the firstborn. And as Elijah is taken into heaven, Elisha addresses him as his father. On this subject, Matt Colvin writes Paul sends Timothy to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 16.10, stating that he is to do the same job as Paul himself.

Timothy's work is the same as Paul's. On several other occasions, Paul mentions that Timothy is doing the work of the Lord, or is a fellow worker with me, or a fellow worker with God. I would suggest that these terms should be taken as vivid expressions of the shaliak role.

First of all, as an apostle sent by God or Christ to do Christ's work. And then by Timothy, who, sent by Paul as Paul's own shaliak, is likewise engaged in the same work as his master. And is thus, as it were, a second order shaliak of Christ.

He is referred to by Paul as my fellow worker in Romans 16.21. 1 Timothy 4.6 refers to Timothy as a servant of Christ Jesus. It is unclear whether this is a more general appellation, or refers to his role as the delegate of Christ's delegate. Nonetheless, the point is clear.

Timothy is Paul's plenipotentiary emissary, not a local pastor. He stands on one side with

Paul as Christ's representative, not on the other side with the seven and other elders as the church's representative. He goes on to observe, that Timothy is a virtual copy of Paul is underlined by 1 Corinthians 4.16-17. I urge you, imitate me.

For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church. The charge to imitate Paul is accompanied by the sending of Timothy towards the fulfilment of this end, as the son is the preeminent imitator and representation of the father. As a participant in his father's ministry, and as Paul's right hand man, Timothy had immense authority to wield, even being given the commission to choose and appoint church officers as Paul's representative on occasions.

As the apostolic ministry was temporary, upon Paul's death, Timothy would presumably have ceased to be the Apostle's apostle, and would presumably have become a bishop. Paul has also determined to send Epaphroditus to the Philippians. He is another fellow worker with a close relationship to Paul.

Paul gives a threefold description of Epaphroditus' relationship to him. Brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, evoking different key governing metaphors for thinking about the church and the service of Christ within it. The church is a family, and fellow members are our brothers and sisters.

The ministry of the church is like labour in a field or in a building, and our companions are fellow workers. The church is engaged in a battle against principalities and powers, and fighting against enemies within and without, and our comrades in this struggle are fellow soldiers. Epaphroditus was presumably one of the Philippians himself, and had borne the Philippians' gift to Paul earlier.

In prison, Paul would be dependent upon support from friends and relatives, and Epaphroditus had provided such support from the Philippians. However, he had fallen very seriously ill, which the Philippians had heard about. Both Epaphroditus and the Philippians were deeply distressed by the other party's distress.

God had granted Epaphroditus healing though, and now Paul is sending him back to the Philippians, so that they might rejoice to be reunited with their brother. In their rejoicing, Paul himself would be enriched, even though he would lose Epaphroditus' presence with him, as the blessing of others in Christ is something that blesses us all. Paul is concerned that Epaphroditus, who is likely bearing the letter, be welcomed back with joy and honour.

He is a faithful servant, who has been obedient in the work of Christ almost to the point of death, following the example of his master. Those who perform the work of Christ at such personal cost are worthy of honour. A question to consider.

How does the concern that people work out their salvation mark Paul's work more generally? In most translations, Philippians 3 begins in a surprising manner. We are at the midpoint of the letter, but the first word of the chapter is finally. While some have speculated that we have two separate letters of Paul that have been merged together, there are far less extreme explanations, such as the possibility that the Greek term used here might better be translated and so, serving to reiterate the exhortation of chapter 2, verse 18.

The opening statement probably concludes the preceding section, before Paul switches to another point. Beyond the surprising opening, some scholars have argued that the shift in Paul's argument at this point is a further indication that we are dealing with combined letters, rather than a single one. However, the shift is by no means as abrupt as some argue.

And indeed, there are some robust thematic ties between chapters 2 and 3, a point that people like N.T. Wright have made in considerable detail. Christ's voluntary emptying himself of his prerogatives parallels with Paul's own emptying himself of his Jewish prerogatives in this chapter. It might well also set the stage for the concluding statement of this chapter, as we will see.

While Paul seems to have either written to or taught the Philippians on some of these matters already, teaching them the same lesson again is not onerous for Paul, while guarding the Philippians against potential dangers will be of great value to them. He warns the Philippians against some group of Jews in a way that is little short of startling. He refers to these people as dogs, evildoers, and as those who mutilate the flesh.

Each of these terms would be more commonly expected to be a reference to Gentiles, outsiders to the covenant people of God. Dogs were unclean scavengers, evildoers were those who broke the law, non-observant Jews and pagan Gentiles. Perhaps most shocking, the word for mutilation plays off the word for circumcision.

In the Old Testament circumcision was the sign of the covenant and membership of the people of God. However, mutilation of the flesh was a practice of paganism, strictly forbidden to Jews. Males whose genitals were mutilated were also excluded from the assembly of Israel.

However, here people who would usually associate themselves with circumcision are described not as the circumcision, but as the mutilation. Paul's statement here would have a clear shock effect. His shocking challenge to his Jewish opponents continues in verse 3. Not only does he refer to them as the mutilation, he also claims the title of the circumcision from them.

We, Jews and Gentile Christians, who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh, are the true circumcision. Presumably Paul is



alluding here to the reality of the new covenant, promised back in Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 6. And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. The true eschatological people of God are marked out not by circumcision and observance of the ceremonies of the Jewish Torah, but by the Spirit of God and true worship.

Paul points out, against those seeking to place confidence in the flesh, that if they want to play that game, he could easily beat them at it. He makes a similar argument in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 21-22. But whatever anyone else dares to boast of, I'm speaking as a fool, I also dare to boast of that.

Are there Hebrews? So am I. Are there Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. In a popular reading of these verses of Philippians, Paul was once the stereotypical Pelagian. He believed that he could earn God's favour through his ethical exertion. After his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul came to the awareness that his own righteousness, his moral effort, was insufficient, and that instead of trusting in his own good works, he should trust in the perfect divine righteousness of Christ instead.

This reading is a compelling one in many respects. On the surface of things it seems to make sense of the passage, and more importantly, it articulates a deeply Christian logic, a truth that has proved liberating for countless persons over the centuries, declaring the fact of God's free acceptance of us in his Son. On closer examination, however, cracks start to appear.

One of the first things that might trouble the reader holding this interpretation is that, of the things that Paul formally counted gain, most of them do not actually have to do with his own works. Rather, a number of them describe advantages that Paul enjoyed purely by virtue of his birth or ancestry. Whatever we might say about his later Torah observance and zeal, being circumcised on the eighth day, being an Israelite, being a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and having impeccable Hebrew pedigree, were largely accidents of Paul's birth, unrelated to anything that he himself had done.

Instead of serving as signs of moral attainment, these biographical details were indicators of covenant status, signs that Paul was situated, or so he once thought, on the inside track of God's purposes and blessings. We need not, of course, just switch from a reading focusing entirely upon performance to one that speaks only of status. Both of these things are present.

However, matters come into clearer focus when we understand the sort of identity that Paul once boasted in, not least because similar sorts of identities continue to exert a powerful force in our own world. If the identity that Paul is describing here is not that of the classic legalist, what is it? I believe we could think of an analogous sort of identity in

the patriot. Paul wasn't that unlike the patriot who takes pride in the fact that he is, say, a true Englishman, as opposed to all those unwelcome immigrants.

His family has been present on English soil way back before 1066. His forefathers have fought for their country in various wars. From as early as he can remember, he has been steeped in English culture.

He flies the cross of St George from the top of his house. He has a painting of the Queen over his fireplace. He attends church in his local Church of England parish.

He proudly buys British and he follows the fortunes of the English cricket team. He might have been a Russian, a French, a Turk, or a Prussian, or perhaps Italian, but in spite of all temptations to belong to other nations, he remains an Englishman. The performance of such a patriot isn't undertaken to earn English status, but to demonstrate and broadcast his claims to it, to mark him out from those who aren't Englishmen, or who are lesser Englishmen, and more fully to ground and celebrate his sense of identity in it.

The roots of Paul's former identity lay in the Torah, the law that was given at Sinai, Israel's covenant charter, its Magna Carta as it were. As Paul committed himself to the Torah and its way of life, he was showing himself to be a true Israelite. The flesh which he speaks of probably refers to something broader than sinful human nature alone.

It also encompasses the familial and social networks to which people belong. Paul's attitude towards this status is striking. He now regards it as dung and as a loss for the sake of Christ.

For the sake of Christ, Paul suffers the loss of all things, surrendering them so that he might be found in Christ. Rather than the status that he once so highly valued, Paul now wishes to pursue the status of being in Christ, a status that entails being conformed to Christ's death in order to share in his resurrection. When we step back and look at the picture that emerges, analogies between Paul's account of his own story, and that of Christ's humility in taking the form of a servant in chapter 2, become quite obvious.

Both Paul and Christ enjoyed a privileged status and both regarded that status as something that they would not take advantage of, giving up privilege for the sake of service in the way of the cross. Being conformed to Christ entails sharing the shape of his story, refusing to aggrandize ourselves in our privileged statuses and our power, and following the path of service instead. At this point, an analogy between the identity that Paul describes and our various privileged forms of status might become apparent to us.

Although Paul the legalist trying to earn his own salvation might not strike so close to home to some of us, Paul the privileged person, who is called to adopt an entirely new posture towards his privilege, might prove to be uncomfortably so. Privilege, although a term that is often misused, is a powerful reality in our social, civic and political life.

Whether the privileges in question arise from our race, our gender, our nationality, our ethnicity, our language, our socio-economic status, our class, our education, our age, our physical ability, or some other factor or combination of factors, we need to become aware of the advantages that we enjoy over others, often merely by virtue of the accident of birth.

These are all ways in which we can habitually take confidence in the flesh. They can be ways in which, like Paul prior to his conversion, we assess our worth. In the face of God's grace given to us in Jesus Christ, and in the light of the example that Christ gives to us in his self-humiliation, we must think of those things from which we formerly derived a sense of self-worth very differently.

Paul, as if tallying up the value of his assets, suddenly assigns all of his former riches of status he once so prized, all that was once assessed as gain, to the loss column. On account of this assessment, he is willing to suffer the loss of all of his losses, in order that he might gain Christ, who is the only true gain. Christ was found in human form, now Paul seeks to be found in Christ.

Just as Christ took the form of a servant, and emptied himself of his prerogatives, so Paul must do the same. Formerly, he had depended upon a righteousness of his own that came from the law. While the law was a gift of God, it seemingly marked out Torah-observant Israelites in a way that led many to believe that their standing with God was founded upon their own worthiness in some sense, not so much as something that they had earned, but as something that was fittingly given to them over others.

However, the true source of standing with God is not Torah reception and observance, but the free gift of God that comes through the faith of Christ. The faith of Christ here is a faith that is entirely ordered around Christ. It is a faith that receives the free gift of Christ.

It is a faith that looks to Christ. It is a faith that bears the impress of Christ's own faithfulness, and follows in the path that he himself set. Paul speaks of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus in verse 8, and in verse 10, unpacks the meaning and significance of this, relating it to the reception of the righteousness of God.

To know Christ and the power of his resurrection is to know God's righteousness. The resurrection was the vindication, or the justification of Christ. It was God's publicly enacted sentence in Christ's favour, that actively declared that Christ was in right standing with God.

Christ was, as Romans 4.25 teaches, raised for our justification. We currently share in his vindication by the Spirit, in anticipation of our own justification on the last day. However, sharing in Christ's resurrection vindication requires our sharing in his sufferings, and being conformed to him in his death.

We must be emptied of ourselves and our prerogatives if we are to receive the one who emptied himself for us. We might here think of Galatians 2.20 We might also think of Paul's teaching in Romans 6, where he speaks of our being united with Christ in the death like his in baptism, so that we will be assured of our being united with him in a resurrection like his. Baptism declares and portrays what is true of the Christian, that through union with Christ by faith, and passing into participation in the reality of his death, we are assured of enjoying the vindication in his resurrection, being declared righteous in the present, in anticipation of the verdict that will be declared over us and our works at the last day.

Paul recognises that he is still on the way, he has not arrived yet. Complacency is dangerous. In union with Christ, we have a reality filled assurance and anticipation of the final verdict in our favour.

That verdict, however, has yet to be declared, so we should not be presumptuous, but should faithfully press on. We aren't ultimately the ones winning this for ourselves. Christ's laying claim on us precedes anything that we do.

Our pressing on in faith is merely a response to his grace to us. Paul compares this to a race that must be run. The runner must not look back, but must fix his eyes firmly upon the prize, and put every muscle into the struggle to obtain it.

Paul has been concerned throughout the letter to ground the Philippians in an appropriate way of thinking. He speaks of the mindset that he has just described in himself as characteristic of the mature. Those who do not yet think this way should grow into such an understanding as they mature in their faith.

It is important that, even though we haven't attained our final goal yet, we hold on to what we have attained, and don't lose ground once gained. As he often does, Paul presents himself as an example for the people to whom he is writing to follow. Paul imitates Christ, and others should imitate him as a worked example of what this looks like.

Imitation is a key element of Paul's ethics. Christ doesn't just give us laws or instructions, but a pattern in himself to follow, and patterns to follow in his ministers too. His ministers must set this pattern for the people that they minister to.

Their behaviour gives people a clear sense of what faithfulness looks like in practice. So often it is in the lives of faithful saints that the truth of the gospel most powerfully impresses itself upon us. We have also seen in this chapter that Paul presents his pattern of behaviour as both like Christ, as described in the preceding chapter, and also as an entrance into Christ's life.

Choosing patterns to follow is really important, because few are faithful in a way worthy

of our emulation, and there are a very great many whose way of life is entirely contrary to Christ. Paul says that we must keep our eyes upon those who live according to the right pattern, while recognising those who walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Walking as an enemy of the cross of Christ is living in a manner that is entirely opposed to the pattern of life that Christ left for us in his emptying of himself and his going to the cross.

Christians must follow the way of the cross, taking up their own crosses, whatever these crosses might be, and walking in Christ's steps. Those who reject the way of the cross have their final end in destruction. By contrast, as the faithful people of God, we should follow the cross-shaped pattern that Christ left for us, and have our citizenship in heaven.

We expect Christ's revelation from heaven to vindicate us, transforming our bodies to be like his glorious resurrection body, so that we will share in his status and glory. These closing verses might have especially resonated with the Philippians, and as N.T. Wright has suggested, may have presented them with an indication of the form that their self-emptying might have to take. Philippi was a Roman colony, which meant that its citizens had the great privilege of having citizenship in the city of Rome too.

This is a status that many of them would have greatly prized, much as Paul had once prized his identity as a Torah-observant Jew. Like Paul, however, the status they once so valued must be reassessed in the light of something that greatly exceeds it in worth. Philippians, you think your Roman citizenship is of immense value, and sets you above others? Well, your real citizenship is in heaven, where we look not to Caesar, but to Christ as our Lord and Saviour.

Thinking in such a way, and acting in terms of it, might require the Philippians to empty themselves of some of the privileges that they once so valued as Roman citizens, counting them as loss in order to gain citizenship of a far greater city. A question to consider. What might be some of the things that, like Paul's identity as a Torah-observant Jew, or the Philippians' identity as Roman citizens, we might be called to empty ourselves of in order to gain Christ? What might this emptying of ourselves, or counting as loss, look like in practice? Philippians chapter 4, the conclusion of this epistle, begins by returning to themes from earlier in the letter.

Paul had begun his treatment of appropriate Christian behaviour in chapter 1 verses 27-28 with the following charge. Now, in the first verse of this chapter, he returns to the charge to stand firm in the Lord in the manner that he has described, summing up the main body of the letter. Paul describes the Philippians as those whom he loves and longs for, his joy and his crown.

Paul's heart is knit to the Philippians. When Paul speaks about the people to whom he ministers, it is very clear that he relates to them in an intense and intimate manner. He

regards them as his children.

He yearns for their growth in the Lord. He constantly prays for them. He experiences anguish or deep sorrow at news of their sins or failings.

He rejoices to hear of the prospering of God's truth among them. Paul is no mere teacher of an ideology or religious system or philosophy. He is like a mother bearing children.

He is concerned above all to see their health and their growth. He rejoices and boasts over their growth, like a grandmother might speak of her young grandchildren's milestones, taking the greatest of vicarious delight in their well-being. It seems as if there are two women in the church who were at odds with each other, Euodia and Syntyche.

Paul speaks of them gently. They have both served the gospel with Paul and his fellow workers and are to be honoured for their labours. He addresses each of them personally, entreating them to settle their differences and agree in the Lord.

Their lack of agreement was presumably causing problems in the church, where they were prominent and important members. He also addresses a particular person, referred to as his true or loyal companion, to help the two of them to settle their differences and to pursue their ministries in the church. From the grammar we know that it is a man, but his identity is not clearly specified.

Most likely it was Epaphroditus who was bearing the letter, was also referred to within it and would be present when it was read. Rather than rebuking the women, Paul appeals to and exhorts them. And he asks Epaphroditus not to discipline them, but to help them, to reconcile and presumably also more generally, honouring them on account of their previous labours.

Their names are in the Book of Life, a fact that, when considered, will encourage Epaphroditus to treat them appropriately, as a help to them in their growth to godliness. Once again Paul calls the Philippians to rejoice. This is an exhortation to which he has returned on a number of key occasions in the letter.

He began by speaking of the way that he himself rejoiced in his circumstances. Then he summoned the Philippians to join him and, in chapter 3 verse 1, called them to rejoice in the Lord. The Philippians were shocked by anxiety, but should bring their concerns to the Lord in prayer.

Just as their gentleness should be made known to everyone, their needs should be made known to the Lord. The result of their following these instructions would be a state of peace, a peace that comes from God himself, which cannot be accounted for by any merely human explanation. Such a peace would guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Christ can still the stormy waters of our hearts and minds. When others around us are stirred up by anger, resentment, antagonisms and tensions, fear and anxiety, we can know the calm that enables us to think clearly and to act wisely. Paul is very clear about where such peace comes from.

It comes from turning our attention to God in prayer and thanksgiving, from learning to rejoice and practising gentleness with our neighbours. It comes from God's work within us. The resulting peace guards our hearts and minds in situations of conflict.

When there is conflict and trouble without, it is this peace that reigns within. Our hearts and minds will be protected from being caught up in all of this strife. We will be able to think and act with wisdom and grace when others are losing their composure, their wits or their clarity of mind.

This section concerned with rejoicing, prayer and thanksgiving focuses upon key elements of worship and piety. In verses 8-9 however, Paul's attention turns to virtues that were more generally recognised among the pagans, as commentators such as Gordon Fee and Mournner Hooker have noted. He takes the language of Hellenistic moralism but situates it within a very different frame, one established by the Christian gospel.

The expressions that he uses here are common in Greco-Roman moral thought but very unusual in Paul. Paul has earlier revealed a stark contrast between a Greco-Roman moral vision and the gospel, but now he shows the way that the gospel allows us to appropriate some of the riches of the Greeks and Romans. Fee argues that the words translated, think about these things, would be better translated as, take into account these things.

Paul's point is not so much to think on higher things, but as those who are living in two worlds, and as those who have counted as lost things that formerly gave them a sense of their worthiness and things which they highly valued, the Philippian Christians should carefully assess their heritage. Rather than completely writing off their Greco-Roman heritage, they ought to evaluate it more closely according to the gospel and the criteria that Paul here enumerates, each of which must be considered in the light of the gospel itself. In the radical reassessment to which he has called them, they should not jettison everything.

Paul's criteria are as follows. Whatever is lovely. This is perhaps the most surprising of the criteria.

It probably has to do with those things that properly excite our love and admiration, things that are beautiful, delightful, and admirable. This isn't an essentially moral criterion, suggesting that it is good and appropriate for us to find things in God's world pleasing, and a sort of faith that would abandon such things is not healthy. Christians should enjoy good music, for instance, not just for some moral end, but simply because it

is good music.

Whatever is admirable. Again, whatever rightly wins people's praise and admiration. Paul elaborates these two criteria a little by speaking of things that have excellence or are worthy of praise.

Paul had not just taught the Philippians in such matters. He had also presented himself as a worked example to them, as he had practiced these things in his own life. They should practice these things, and they would know the presence of the God of Peace with them.

Paul had received a gift of support from the Philippians through Epaphroditus, something that would presumably have meant a very great deal to him while in prison. And now he expresses his rejoicing in the Lord on receiving it. However, the nature of Paul's thanksgiving is surprising.

Rather than directly thanking the Philippians, he rejoices in the Lord for the new expression of their concern for him. Then he downplays his need. He has learned to be content in whatever situation he finds himself in.

He has been given such a sense of sufficiency by God himself, who provides him with the strength that he needs, a strength sufficient to whatever situation he finds himself in. He emphasizes the generous participation of the Philippians in his ministry, not just in their most recent gift, but in the past. Their most recent gift was a renewed reminder of a partnership that he shared with them over many years.

Again, Paul's response to the Philippians' gift is surprising. He explicitly declares that he does not seek the gift, but rather the fruit that increases to the Philippians' own credit. Rather than expressing his thanks directly to them and claiming that he is in their debt, as most people would do, he declares that God will supply their every need.

As Peter Lighthouse observes in his book, *Gratitude and Intellectual History*, the Christian approach to gratitude is profoundly subversive, especially within patronage cultures, where political and social advancement and dominance arise in large measure through unilateral impositions of obligation and the gaining of honour by means of gift-giving. Within the first century world, the New Testament's teaching concerning gift-giving and reception was a threatening one, not least in how persistent it was in directing thanksgiving to God above all others. This determined rendering of thanks to God undermined the leverage of the powerfully obliging reciprocities that dominated social life and the hierarchies that they produced and sustained.

It made possible the ingratitude of departing from tradition, of leaving father and mother to follow Christ, and of reneging on the imposed social debts by which patrons and powerful benefactors secured their social power. By firmly directing gratitude to God, it



resisted the supposed entitlement of the wealthy to employ God's gifts to them as means of accruing power by imposing debts upon others. The new form of gift economy established by Christ and the Apostles led to the eschewing of honour competitions, to releasing others from debt, and to the replacement of the vicious asymmetries of hierarchical patron-client gift relations with relations of mutual patronage.

Lighthouse remarks upon the Apostle Paul's practice of thanksgiving in his letters, the manner in which it demonstrates the distinctive character of resolutely God-directed gratitude, Paul's expressions of thanksgiving in his letters, he observes, are offered almost exclusively to God alone, and Paul offers such thanks for benefits received by others no less than for those he has received himself. Perhaps most startling to his contemporaries' ears would be the way in which he responded to gifts given to him, not least when he expresses his appreciation for the support of the Philippians in this chapter, when he says, I thank my God for your remembrance of me, in reference to their support of him in his ministry. Lighthouse remarks, Paul doesn't employ the language or perform the cultural courtesies associated with indebtedness.

Rather than placing Paul in the Philippians' debt, their gift is a token of their communion with him in his gospel ministry. Paul nowhere expresses an expectation or obligation on his part to repay them, but he directs their attention to God, their common benefactor, who acts as the guarantor of any debt that his servant Paul might incur, and my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Lighthouse writes again, In the community of Jesus the only debt is the debt of love.

Thanks is owed, but it is owed for, rather than to, benefactors. Recipients of gifts are not indebted to the givers. They do not owe return payment.

Givers do not impose burdens of gratitude on their beneficiaries. They cannot use their gifts to lord over recipients. The Church's continual practice of thanksgiving cultivates a well-directed sense of gratitude, which has liberating political potential.

When we repeatedly recognize and honor our great divine benefactor as the ultimate generous giver of every good and perfect gift, whatever hands we may have received them from, the power of lesser benefactors to wield control over us by their gifts is considerably weakened, as they can no longer command the sort of gratitude and obligations that belong to God alone. The economy of gifts ceases to be an engine of hierarchy and social inequality, when our thanks and obligation for all gifts is ultimately seen to belong to God alone. All others are, at best, channels of and participants in God's act of giving.

Furthermore, when God is understood to be the guarantor of debts, giving to the poor can be regarded as a matter of lending to the Lord, as we see in Proverbs 19, verse 17. Rather than placing the recipients of charity in a relationship of indebtedness to the givers, it frees both to engage in the transaction. Trusting that repayment would be

provided by a third party.

As John Barclay suggests, the conviction that God would repay those who gave to the poor was complemented by the agency afforded to the recipient of charity in blessing the giver, or seeking recompense against the uncharitable, a principle that we see in Deuteronomy chapter 24, verses 13 to 15. In such a manner, the hierarchy of the cultural form of patronage was replaced by a mutual patronage, one reinforced by the Christian teaching that the one gift of the Spirit was represented in the many spiritual gifts of the members of the body of Christ. Such a practice of gift can produce the loving unity that Paul calls for, disarming the logic that drives antagonism and hostile competition.

In verse 20, Paul concludes the section with a doxology, directing all towards God's glory. And the epistle ends with greetings. Paul wants his greetings in Christ Jesus to be conveyed to every Christian in Philippi.

The brothers with him, presumably his fellow workers, greet them. Also the wider body of Christians there, especially those in Caesar's household, presumably various servants and officials, extended their greetings. The reference to Caesar's household lends support to the idea that Paul is in prison in Rome.

Finally, he invokes the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, desiring that it might be with their spirit. A question to consider. How might we practically go about applying Paul's criteria to certain aspects of our own culture?