

We're going to be in the Book of Philippians, which is really more of a letter than it is a book. It was written by the Apostle Paul to the Church, to all the Christians in the city of Philippi.

CPC has recently been focused on the habit of open-handedness. Some of those themes and ideas are relevant in a week like this one. So my goal this morning is to use those messages as something of a springboard. To bring some continuity of thought as we head into the holidays with all of the hustle and bustle and complicated feelings we can sometimes have around this time of year.

Something interesting began to happen to me over the last week or two that I don't have any earthly clue what to make of, but it feels too much to be coincidental. It has to be a God thing. He hasn't clued me in on what he's up to, except that it's been such a joy and a gift to me. Late last week, I began to feel this nearness with God. I don't use phrases like that lightly.

If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you may have had an experience like this or know what this feels like, but it's this deep awareness of the presence, goodness, and providence of God that is hard to put into words. He just feels so close. It's like a mountaintop moment with all the emotions and just being on fire in your faith. But it's different for me, all the same.

It started on my drive home one afternoon, where I often will call people that are on my mind and just check in and see how they're doing. And this afternoon, two people came to my heart, who are near and dear to me from my past. These are men that I've walked with, I've journeyed with, and discipled in some cases.

They both came to my mind that day. So I called one, and I know he's an engineering manager at one of the major tech companies. He's busy. He's not going to answer. There's no way. It's in the middle of the day, so I thought I would leave him a message to let him know that I was thinking about him, then I would call the other person, whom I knew I was much more likely to reach.

We'll call them Friend A and Friend B. I called Friend A, and he answered! It turned out that he was in the midst of a pretty bad day, a pretty bad week, and it was just a perfect storm of work junk that left him feeling discouraged. I was just so glad to be able to have that moment with him because he has been such a generous friend with me. He always shows up, and so it was a blessing to be able to pour into him in a low point and just pray with him, normal ministry pastor stuff. Thirty-five minutes later, we were done with our phone call. I get home, and my phone starts to ring.

Now, keep in mind, I didn't call anybody else because Friend A answered. Guess who it was? It was Friend B. What a coincidence! So we talk, and he was in good spirits, and I'm in good spirits, and we have a great chat. I hang up, sit down, and go back to work. Three hours later, I get a text message from a third friend, another guy that I had discipled and baptized, who I hadn't talked with in seven years, before Covid, because he'd fallen back into addiction and all kinds of stuff, which ended up with him in jail.

Now he wants to talk and catch up. So the coincidences are starting to pick up steam. They're starting to pile up just a little bit, and I'm not kidding, but 30 minutes later, another text comes in from a woman that I hadn't talked to in a very long time, who I also had the privilege of marrying her and her husband right at the beginning of Covid.

She's not a Christian, but she would often reach out when she had questions about Jesus and faith and about religion. She's been seeking and curious for a long time, and all of a sudden, she said, I had crossed her mind. She just wanted to reach out and see how I was. This pattern continued over the next couple of days. Just random people from my past who I haven't talked to in ages who said they thought of me, and who reached out. They wanted to connect.

Maybe you're thinking that I must have posted something interesting on social media or something. Except I didn't. I deactivated all my accounts like a year ago. I don't even use that stuff anymore. So for the last week and a half, I've been having these totally unexpected connections and conversations with people that I love and cherish deeply, who I haven't kept in close contact with. Like a lot of us, life happens, and before you know it, it's been a while since you talked to somebody.

In the midst of that third conversation with that third friend, whom I hadn't talked to in seven years, he began to catch me up on his life and where he's been. All the normal stuff that you do when you catch up with an old friend, except the story that he's telling me is a life where sometimes the only way that God is able to get our attention is when we are lying flat on our back in the pits at absolute rock bottom. Sometimes that's the only time we will ever pause long enough to look up and see God.

What he shared with me was a story about such intense misery and intense suffering that this man, whom I had discipled, who was so full of joy for life and who once spoke of wanting to go into full-time ministry, had reached the unfortunate conclusion in the midst of it all that God must not be good. Or perhaps not there at all. It was heartbreaking to hear all that he had to endure, mostly by his own doing. But nevertheless, his pain and his experience were very real, and my heart broke because of how deeply I have cared about that man over the years.

So, as I reflect on his experience and as I'm keenly aware of some of the stories of people in this room, I recognize how hard it is sometimes to endure so much and still have an ever-present awareness of the presence and goodness of God in our lives. So I say all of that as a bit of a prelude before we jump into Paul's letter to the Philippians, because understanding Paul's words in this letter requires that we understand his unique circumstances.

As the Book of Acts draws to a close in Acts 21, Paul arrives in Jerusalem, the epicenter of all of Judaism, and there he begins to preach the gospel or the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, to crowds who have rejected him, which infuriates them. They arrest him and accuse him of trying to turn them away from Moses and their customs.

The more that he shared about Jesus, the angrier they got until they wanted him dead. But Paul, being a citizen of the Roman Empire, had some protections. So he entered the Roman judicial system, which eventually concluded with him appealing his case directly to Caesar. As the book of Acts draws to a close, Paul is under guard in Rome awaiting trial with the very real possibility that Caesar may eventually hear Paul's case and see him as a malcontent. See him as somebody who's stirring up trouble throughout the Roman Empire, and he may have him executed.

Now, I want you to pause and ask you quietly to reflect for a moment if you were in Paul's shoes. How do you think you might be feeling if you were to put yourself right smack dab in his situation? There are people who want you dead, who are stirring up trouble for you everywhere you go, at every possible turn. You've been arrested; you've been put in jail unjustly. You're probably beyond broke. You're hungry. You've appealed your case to Caesar, and so now you have to travel hundreds of miles to Rome to wait, who knows how long, to see him. Oh, by the way, we didn't read this part, but you were literally shipwrecked on your way to Rome, where you almost die, and now a guard is standing outside your door, no matter what you do, until that fateful day comes when you are either acquitted or killed.

Some of you have experienced seasons like those seasons where every possible thing that can go wrong has gone wrong, and the very last thing you want to hear in those moments, perhaps the very last thing you believe in those moments, is that God is good. It's like someone fleeing from a burning house, and as they watch their memories and their home and all their belongings go up in flames before their very eyes, a witness walks up and says, "Have you seen what a beautiful day it is?" However true that may be, that's probably the last thing that you care about or want to hear in a moment like that.

It's like mornings in my house. I'm a morning person. I love mornings. My wife is not a morning person. She loves sleep. And in my 20 years of marriage, I've learned some very important things. One of which is to not be a morning person to a non-morning person ever. It's not going to end well for you.

So it's in this season in Rome that Paul is visited by a man from Philippi named Epaphroditus, who brings Paul a gift, which prompts Paul to sit

down and write this letter to send back to the church with Epaphroditus as he returns home.

I want you to pay particular attention to the word gift. It's a theme that we'll be revisiting throughout today's message because gifts form the two bookends of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. Philippians 1:1-7

What I want you to notice is that the root word of the word grace and the word thank that comes up in that block of text is actually the Greek word *charis*, which, if you're not familiar with that word, is where we get the English word charisma. Typically, this is a word in the New Testament that's translated as grace. But it's actually a word for gift. It's just that it's a very specific gift that scholars will call free or uncoerced or cheerfully bestowed. In other words, you don't do anything to deserve this gift.

Paul makes this clear in Romans 4, he says, "*Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift (charis) but as an obligation*" (Romans 4:4). So any of you that have a job, if you get a paycheck for the work and the time that you put in, it would be silly to call that a gift. You've earned it. That's what Paul is saying here. *Charis* is never something that you earn. It's something undeservedly given to you. In Philippians 4, Paul sends his gratefulness to the church in Philippi for the support and the help that they sent, with Epaphroditus to him, and then goes on to say:

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Philippians 4:14-20

Once again, Paul speaks of gifts as he ends his letter just like he began his letter. But this time, it's not the word *charis*; it's the word *doma*. It's

the thing that you and I give open-handedly to one another that is tangible to another person. So it carries with it a slightly different connotation than charis.

I want you to notice also that Paul doesn't speak of these gifts from a scarcity mindset. He says things like, "I have more than enough. I am amply supplied." He says, "God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus." Does it sound like Paul is worried about anyone running out of anything? He's not worried about that in the slightest. That is his faith on display.

I want to step back for a moment and ask if that isn't Paul's letter and his response to all of these circumstances that he's living under right now, strange? Isn't it bizarre how he's writing, considering all that he's having to endure at this moment? He's in chains; he's in prison. He might die. Doesn't he know that he should be miserable and angry and anxious and resentful? Life is not going his way at all. He doesn't have what other people have. He doesn't have freedom. He doesn't have wealth. Nothing is going his way. So why would he speak like this? Why would he seem so indifferent to his own pain?

The answer to that question is experience. You see, Paul has experience with this. This isn't his first rodeo. That means that when trouble comes, there's an endurance that is there in him that he will later say surpasses understanding. What do I mean? I mean that every single one of us who has ever learned how to do anything had to start out by being bad at it. That's true of crawling. That's true of walking, that's true of running. That's true of riding a bike and playing a sport. Everything we do, every skill that we have, was honed and mastered through hundreds and thousands of hours of practice, often enduring failure, often enduring pain.

The ultra-marathon runner was first just a marathon runner, who was first just a 5K runner, who was first just trying to run a mile, and that was more than they could possibly imagine ever completing. Their lungs were on fire for that first mile they ever ran. But experience does something to us. And so that's why James, the brother of Jesus, says at the beginning of his letter to all Christians everywhere.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:2-4

Church, by the time Paul sits down to write Philippians, he has been blind. He has been hungry. He has been poor. He has lost loved ones. He has lost the very life that he once worked so hard to build as a Pharisee of Pharisees. Some scholars say he had the equivalent of six PhDs. He has been arrested. He has been imprisoned. You name it, Paul has had to endure it. And what he has come to see, what he's come to realize, is that God is faithful and God will always be faithful.

Jesus once said, "*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33). Paul believes those words because Paul has

seen Jesus do it time and time again against all odds. Jesus shows up, and he does it. So, as Paul sits in confinement and pens this letter, is he surprised by Epaphroditus' arrival? Is he surprised that the church in Philippi would be so generous and open-handed with him? Is this something that he would not have expected? Absolutely not.

This is exactly who he knows God to be. This is exactly who he knows Jesus to be. Because think about it, from the days of Adam and Eve in the garden, eating from the Tree of Life to the days of Moses and the Israelites' journeying through the wilderness, God has routinely shown himself to be a benevolent, generous, giving God, which is different from the world around them.

The gods of the Greeks, the gods of the Romans, or the gods of Babylon all take, but not the one true God, not Yahweh, not the God of Paul. He gives and gives, and he gives abundantly. And that's why, between the two bookends of giving in this letter to the Philippians, Paul exhorts them. He encourages them. He reminds them of how they ought to be or continue to be toward one another. How to treat one another, how to love one another. And he says this in chapter 2.

Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. Philippians 2:1-4

In other words, if you can count your blessings and remember how God has loved you, then you also can and should have that same love for one another. In a world that strives to be known, in a world that rewards and encourages you to go get yours, in a world of self-centered opportunism and endless accumulation and consumption, Paul says that's not the way to live life. That's not the way to true life.

The way to life, to true life, is to live as Jesus lived. And what comes next in Philippians is the fulcrum. It's the pivot point that this entire letter hinges on.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. Philippians 2:5-7

Unlike Adam and Eve, who chose to consume and take for themselves what wasn't theirs to take, all because they could "become like God." And unlike the Israelites in the wilderness who struggled so mightily not to gather for themselves more than they needed that day, Jesus took his equality with the Father, and he laid it all down. He did it as grace, as an unmerited, undeserved, ultimate gift, born out of love for us. What Paul wants us to see are all the countless ways that God has shown up for them and for you again and again.

That is when you look back over your life and reflect, you may see those hardships. Go ahead and see them. See the hardships. Absolutely remember them even. But then make sure that you also remember and recognize his abundant generosity and deliverance in your life. That's why I believe the ultimate conclusion, his ultimate point in his letter, and what he wants them to remember above everything else, is in chapter 4.

In the midst of all pain and suffering, and in the midst of all circumstances when it feels like there isn't enough for today, let alone for tomorrow, Paul looks in the mirror, and he remembers all of his experiences. All the ways that God has always consistently shown up for him, and his counsel for them is to rejoice.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. *Philippians 4:4-9*

Do you believe that Church? As we head into the week ahead and into the holidays, it would be incredibly easy, in the midst of our circumstances, to live in a perpetual state of anxiety, a perpetual state of despair. Some of us are watching world events, and we find ourselves rather scared and angry. Right now, some of us are watching our bank account, and that number keeps going down. It's dwindling. Some of us have applied to 236 jobs and have landed maybe one interview. Some of us are bracing for holidays without loved ones for the very first time. Some of us can only see our current circumstances, what's happening right now around us, and we lack the perspective to see God's enduring faithfulness.

If that sounds at all like you, I just want to encourage you, because a year ago, that was me. Finances were already tight. I was working in the corporate world. And there was a real danger of layoffs that was looming, and when I felt like I could least endure it, my salary was cut by 30 percent. My job was literally month to month. They were pulling me into meetings, saying, "Hey, you're good for this month." To say my stress levels were high was an understatement.

But I look now, with the benefit of hindsight, and I see that God delivered yet again. He brought us to an amazing church with amazing people like you, who have loved on us more than we deserve, that I get to serve and work with. He's given us daily bread, and nothing about tomorrow is guaranteed, but where I stand today, we have everything that

we need, and so I do rejoice. Like I truly do rejoice. It wasn't easy, but God was faithful. Trials produce faith, and faith produces perseverance.

As I spoke to my old friend that I mentioned at the opening, I wasn't speaking to the broken, angry man that he was just a few months ago. I wasn't speaking to the man who was angry with God and had a few four-letter words for him. Instead, I was speaking to a man who used his time in jail to find sobriety, to find Jesus, and to find accountability. He is absolutely in love with Jesus all over again, and he ministered and encouraged me this week when I needed it.

His life isn't perfect. His circumstances ahead are still super hard, but he has learned, sees, and knows that the Lord is always near. He has peace about him that transcends understanding. It doesn't make sense, and yet he's full of it.

So Church, as we head into a week of Thanksgiving, I recognize that for some of us, giving thanks may come easily. We look around, and everything is great. Thank God for that. But for others of us, it may feel rather hard. But if we can take a moment to pause and reflect and remember all that the Lord has done for us, how can we do anything else?

God has always given you what you need. I know that because you're here and God is actively giving you what you need. God will always give you what you need, even when you cannot yet see it. I believe the way that we respond to any generous gift that we receive is twofold. Number one, we give thanks to the one who gave it. And number two, we open our hands to be channels to others through which God's abundance flows.

In other words, our open-handedness is directly tied to our posture of thanksgiving. When we think we have what we have, because we've earned it and we deserve it, we are not thankful because we have lost sight of who gave it to us. James said in chapter 1, *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows"* (James 1:17).

So this week, may we reflect on the abundant generosity that God has shown us. May we see it and remember it and give thanks to the God who loved us enough to give it. You might ask, "What is he giving me?" The answer is everything. Literally everything. That next breath that you take in your lungs is a gift from God.

So as we prepare for a season of Advent, may we prepare our hearts for the ultimate gift of love in Christ Jesus. Paul wrote this to the church in Corinth.

"For the grace [or the gift] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). We are so rich, not because of our money, but because of who our Lord is.

I want to reflect a little bit. Start by asking the Holy Spirit to guide your reflection. Holy God, help us to see you, to see all the ways in which you've shown up for us. First, I want you to ask yourself where you have seen God's faithfulness in your life this past year. Maybe it's something

big, or maybe it's something small, but take a moment and let one or two things percolate to the top of your mind.

Next, I want to ask you to consider what you are anxious about right now as you head into this season. What's weighing on you? What might feel uncertain or insufficient? Where are you worried you won't have enough? I want to encourage you just to name that honestly before God.

Thirdly, think about how God might be inviting you to open your hands this week with your time, resources, and presence. Is there someone who needs to hear from you? Is there something that you've been holding maybe a little too tightly? Is there a way that you could be a channel of God's abundance to someone else?

Finally, think about what you are genuinely thankful for today even if it's hard, even if it's small. What gift? What *charis* (it's undeserved) can you acknowledge that God has given you in your life?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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