



## The Transforming Power of the Love of God

Philippians 1:3-11

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As a church, as a body of believers, we have been returning to our first love, we have been looking at God's love for us, our love for God and our love for others as an overflow of our love for God. I want for us to see today, in these words from Paul, what a heart gripped by love for God and love for others looks like. I want us to see the way that the human heart is transformed by the power and nature of God's grace and His pursuing, saving love in the human heart. I want you to see with me what a ransomed soul, marked by love for God and love for others looks like. I want us to see the practical results of pursuing love for God and love for one another. It is a potent testimony to the power of God to change a human soul. Look with me at this letter to the Philippians, chapter 1 and starting in verse 3.

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We are very accustomed to reading texts like this from Paul, aren't we? Many times we read him pouring out his heart like this and we grow used to it. But beloved, I want you to think about this, that Paul would write these words at all, that he would have this kind of a heart toward anyone, and particularly toward these Macedonian Gentiles, he being an Asian Jew, is nothing short of a miracle of God. This heart of love that we hear in Paul is not just his natural temperament or character. It is not. We need to understand that when we read these words from Paul, they are nothing short of the evidence of a miraculous metamorphosis of Paul's soul.

We need to remember who and what Paul had been. Paul had been Saul, a self-righteous, self-exalting Pharisee, and a man who knew much Scripture but who was blind to the truth of God. Paul was an exacting and demanding man, one zealous for Judaism and a despiser of Gentiles, fanatical for the Pharisaical interpretation of the Law and a thoroughgoing hater of Christ and of the church. By his own admission, he had persecuted the church of God violently and tried

to destroy it. His purposeful and continued intent had been to brutalize and eventually destroy the church. He was determined to utterly and completely extinguish the church forever. Luke tells us that after the martyrdom of Stephen, an execution of which Paul approved, "Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison." (Acts 8:3, ESV) Perhaps as much as a year later, "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." (Acts 9:1–2, ESV) This is who Paul, then known as Saul, was. His single, overruling desire was to destroy the infant church.

What changed this man? What made a hater of Gentiles, a despiser of the church, write to Gentile Christians in Philippi, "I hold you in my heart...For God is my witness how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus"? Nothing short of a miracle of God. No human explanation, no human influence could account for this total transformation of Paul's heart and soul. There is only one explanation – the power of God's and the persistent, pursuing power of God's saving love in Christ. Paul was running headlong into destruction, and enemy of God and of Christ, an enemy of the church, rightly deserving the wrath of God, but one day, on the road to Damascus, Christ overtook Paul. He brought him face to face with his sin and his rebellion, he showed him the wickedness of his soul, he broke him and brought him to repentance. He opened Paul's sin-blinded eyes to behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He made Paul to see that it is "by grace (that any are saved) through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8–9, ESV) God made Paul to see his sin and to know and believe that "In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace," (Ephesians 1:7, ESV) He made the self-righteous and self-reliant Paul to see and to know and to believe that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins." (Romans 3:23–25, ESV)

God took Paul's hardened heart, a murderous heart, a sinful heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh, a heart of love for God, a heart of love for His Christ, a heart of love for His church, and a heart of love for His gospel and for His truth. This is the transforming power and nature of God's grace and of His pursuing, saving love. It utterly and completely transformed the character and the nature of Paul. He was not the same man. He could write from experience -- (2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV) This is what has happened to Paul and it is what has

happened to you, beloved, if you know Christ as Savior and Lord. You are not what you once were. You have been remade, renewed, transformed, changed. You have been refashioned by God to love Him with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your mind, and all of your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

We must never forget whose we are, why we are here and who Christ is for us. We are the Bride of Christ, the object of His love. We are here because He has brought us out of the miry clay of our sin and set our feet upon a rock. Christ is our Savior, our life, our hope, our deliverer, our shepherd, our King, the lover of our souls and He is worthy of our love. This is all a consequence of the gospel.

I love what DA Carson says about the gospel: Some think of the gospel as so slender it does nothing more than get us into the kingdom...But a biblically-faithful understanding of the gospel shows that gospel to be rich, powerful, the wisdom of God and the power of God, all we need in Christ. It is the gospel that saves us, transforms us, conforms us to Christ, prepares us for the new heaven and the new earth, establishes our relations with fellow-believers, teaches us how to work and serve so as to bring glory to God, calls forth and edifies the church, and so forth. This gospel saves — and 'salvation' means more than just 'getting in,' but transformed wholeness. He's right and that is what we see in Paul as we look at this text today. What we see in Paul, we must pursue ourselves. What do we see in this text?

1) A ransomed soul filled with love for God and love for others is marked by thanksgiving and joy. (Philippians 1:3–5, ESV) When Paul considers the saints in Philippi, his heart overflows with love toward them and his love is expressed in thankfulness and joy. The Lord Jesus Christ has taken a man who hated Christ, who warred against the gospel and who sought out Christians to kill or imprison them and has made him into a man who when he thinks about the church at Philippi is filled with thanksgiving and joy for their participation and fellowship in the gospel, in the redemptive plan of God. Christ had made Paul a thankful man and joyful man as he thought about how God was truly at work in them and about how their fellowship, their participation in the gospel? What does that mean?

Their participation in the gospel was two-fold. First, what filled Paul's heart with thanksgiving and joy was that these people, to whom he had preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, had come

to real saving faith and when he thinks about them, he is moved to thanksgiving to God for their salvation. He is moved to thanksgiving to God for His moving to save the Philippians for His glory and for the fame of His name. He thanks God for His grace to save them but he is also joyful for their partnership, joyful for the way in which, from the very beginning, these Philippians gave and gave to support the ministry of the gospel that had been entrusted to Paul.

He was thankful for Lydia... He was thankful to God for His grace to deliver a slave girl from demon possession and for the way that the fledgling church remained faithful by God's grace even during the uproar that followed in the city... He would have been thankful for God's perfectly timed intervention with the Philippian jailer...

He would have been thankful for the way that these people and others in Philippi proclaimed the gospel in Philippi after they left... All these things filled his soul with joy.

What do we need to see from this? That Paul is moved to thanksgiving and joy when he thinks about the Philippians and their partnership in the gospel from the very beginning is a window into a transformed soul. Paul's transformed heart and soul found joy in what really matters and what really matters is God and people. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength – love Him, love His glory, love His gospel, love His honor and praise – love Him and love your neighbor as yourself. Paul found his joy and thanksgiving in the things that matter. For what are you thankful? What gives you great joy? Now certainly, there is a place for joy in the good gifts of God, there is nothing wrong with taking joy in the good pleasures of this life, but ultimately where do you find joy? What motivates you to thankfulness?

Beloved, the truth is this: you can tell a great deal about a man or a woman's soul by what brings them joy, by what makes them truly thankful. You can tell a great deal about whether that soul is tethered to this-worldliness or to God. Paul found great joy in loving and being thankful for what God loves – namely His church. God's grace does that to you. It makes you thankful for Christ, it makes you thankful for His love and His mercy, it fills your heart with gospel joy for His salvation, for your deliverance, for your rescue first, but it also creates in you a real joy and thankfulness for your brothers and sisters in Christ with whom you share faith and life in Jesus Christ. It just changes your entire perspective on life. The gratitude and sense of joy that he had in his friends in Philippi was wrapped up in the gospel. He loved them, and was thankful for them and felt joy in them because of who they were in Christ. A ransomed

soul that is filled with love for God and love for others is marked by thanksgiving and joy – thanksgiving and joy over the right things – including God’s power and purpose in salvation. That’s what I want you to see next.

2) A ransomed soul filled with love for God and love for others is confident of God’s power and purpose in salvation. (Philippians 1:6, ESV) Paul was confident of God’s faithfulness and His power to accomplish His purpose in these that he was writing to. That is what a heart that is filled with love for God and filled with love for others is like. First, it is confident in the power and the in the character of God to accomplish all of His purposes. Paul was confident in God’s faithfulness and power to accomplish His saving purposes because of the way that God had saved Him. Paul never forgot the sin from which he had been delivered, the judgment that he rightly deserved. Paul understood all that God had done to save Him from sin and hell and death. He would write to Timothy: (1 Timothy 1:12–15, ESV) And Paul understood that God was at work in his salvation – that He is the author and the source of the conversion, justification, salvation and glorification of all who are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation is of the Lord. He accomplished it -- “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” (Romans 11:36, ESV)

God is at work in salvation and God is also at work in your growing up to maturity in grace, growing in love to God and love to others. Salvation is not something that starts with you nor does it start with God and then He says “alright your are on your own now. I gave you a clean slate, a second chance. Now don’t screw it up.” Salvation from beginning to end, from start to finish, is the work of the sovereign grace of God, and so He is at work building you up in Christ, and He is at work one day to present you faultless before His throne with exceeding joy and great glory, in Jesus Christ. (Philippians 2:12–13, ESV)

Because of all that God had done in Paul and all that He was still doing in Paul, Paul also had confidence toward God regarding his brothers and sisters in Philippi. This reality caused Paul to look at the Philippians and out of confidence in God born of love for Him and out of love toward his brothers and sisters in Christ, he could say: “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” A heart of love knows: “I can trust God to work in the lives of my brothers and sisters. God began their salvation; He will finish it.” Oftentimes fellowship in the body of Christ splinters because another Christian isn’t exactly where I’m at on some issue – now not a core doctrinal, gospel issue, there is no fellowship outside of clearly defined truth – that is not what I am talking about. I am talking

about some certain biblical conviction perhaps or an issue of maturity. We many times try to fix that person. But the truth, beloved, is that I'm not responsible to change others. I am responsible to minister God's truth to them in love. I am responsible to speak and teach the truth to them, to live the truth before them, to act in righteousness toward them, to pray for them, to pour myself out for them, but I cannot change them. If a professing brother or a sister is clearly wrong about a major truth, I am responsible to confront them with Scripture truth. If it's a serious heresy or sin that he's involved in, I may eventually need to separate from him. But I must trust that it's God's work to mature that brother or sister in Christ. If God has truly saved him or her, God will finish what he has begun. A heart that loves God and loves others has confidence that God will accomplish fully what he has begun in the life of His children. Let me show a third characteristic of the ransomed, transformed, loving soul.

3) A ransomed soul filled with love for God and love for others delights in the defense, the confirmation, and the camaraderie of the gospel. (Philippians 1:7–8, ESV) Paul is saying, "It is right for me to love you like I do, to hold you in my heart because you love what I love. We are partakers together of grace. We love the same things – Christ and his gospel. We have a certain camaraderie together." Paul saw the Philippians as partakers with him of the grace of God – and that word partaker means much more than just someone who is marginally involved, like someone who might partake of an appetizer at Outback without paying for it or something like that. The idea of partaking is the idea of being invested in something, or being committed to and involved in something. They were partakers in grace with him, the grace that changes a man or a woman, that gives them new affections, that makes them to desire to live for the praise and honor of God. For that reason, Paul felt a deep connection to them, a real camaraderie in the gospel. Even though when he writes this letter they are physically far from one another, Paul's heart was tied up with these people and their hearts were with him and their hearts together were tied up in and entrenched in real love for God and real love for one another. Their common ground and our camaraderie is not based on anything social, economic, intellectual, cosmetic, not an age demographic, an education level, a favorite gladiator or anything else superficial. Our common ground is Christ and His gospel grace. Together we are participants in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul understood what united him to the Philippians and it wasn't earthly things that were the ultimate connection, it was the gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel that together they defended and confirmed.

A heart that is filled with love for God and love for others is motivated by that love to defend and to confirm the gospel. What exactly does that mean? Well, defense of the gospel is just

the idea of a reasoned statement or argument for the gospel – accurately and powerfully reasoning with someone from the Scriptures. The idea of a defense is a clearly articulated and powerful proclamation of gospel truth. Paul did that continually. For instance in Acts 19, recounting his time with the Ephesians we are told that Paul “entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.” (Acts 19:8, ESV) This was the very thing that got Paul thrown into prison, his faithful defense of the gospel of Jesus Christ – again and evidence of the Spirit-wrought change in his soul.

A ransomed soul is concerned for the defense of the gospel and also for its confirmation – that is, to verify or prove that something is true. How do we prove the gospel true? By the way that we live -- to the degree that the fruits of righteousness, that Christlikeness, is evidenced in our lives, to that degree we either confirm or deny the power of the gospel. Jesus said, (Matthew 5:14–16, ESV) This was how Paul lived, transformed from a God-hater into a defender and a confirmer of the gospel and he saw that same heart in the Philippians and so saw them as partakers with him even in his imprisonment. They were part of the same team.

This last week, on December 7th was the 70th anniversary of Pearl Harbor Day, the Japanese sneak attack on our Pacific Fleet in Hawaii. I read that there were men, survivors of that day, that when they die want to be buried at Pearl Harbor with the brothers in arms that they lost there on that day. There is a deep camaraderie in a military unit, particularly one that has seen battle. You are fighting for something bigger than you, for something of surpassing value. But as great as that camaraderie in a military unit, it should pale in comparison to the camaraderie hearts delivered by the grace of God and who have seen battle together.

The church is engaged in mortal combat for the souls of men and women. The truth of the gospel is under siege and needs to be defended. The gospel needs to be confirmed by lives that show the fruit of godliness. This is real battle. Satan hates when God’s truth is set forth in a bold and clear and uncompromising manner. He hates it when people deal with sin by the gospel and pursue living holy lives out of love for God and so it brings difficulty but we must be faithful to endure together – drawing strength from God and from one another. That shared experience and a mutual participation in the grace of God and in the gospel forges deep love as we stand fast together in Christ.

People talk about desiring these close connections in the church, close connections in the body of Christ – this is where they are found, beloved. Right here – defending and contending for the

truth, confirming the gospel together. When I see a brother or sister in Christ standing firmly on the gospel, defending the gospel, clearly and boldly proclaiming the gospel, I am drawn to them. When I see a brother or sister doing hard things in order to live a life pleasing to the Lord, a brother or sister who is pursuing repentance and reconciliation, a brother or a sister doing the hard things to be morally pure, battling the flesh and battling for a submitted heart to Christ in the midst of swirling temptation to do otherwise, a brother or a sister laboring in the Lord to bring their mind and emotions into submission to the truth of God's Word, I am drawn to them. There is a sense of camaraderie with them that is far deeper than merely sharing a meal together or having kids on the same football or wrestling or lacrosse team.

Do you see? A heart that is driven to defend and confirm the gospel is drawn to other hearts that are driven, out of love for God and love for others, to do the same thing. There is a strong, unbreakable bond, a camaraderie that faithful Christians have with one another. That's why Paul says: For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. It is an emotional and deeply connected love. It is also why he prays as he does.

4) A ransomed soul filled with love for God and love for others prayerfully intercedes for excellent lives lived for the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9–11, ESV) Moved by his heart of love for God and for His glory and by his love for the Philippians, Paul prays for what is most significant for his brothers and sisters in Christ. He prays:

...that your love may abound more and more...It is not that the Philippians were not already marked by love for God and love for Paul and all the saints, it is that Paul knows that the source of a life that is faithful to Christ and a life that is faithful to the body of Christ is love...deep, abiding, growing love and so he prays for them to grow in love – to grow in love for God, with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength and for one another like that love we looked at last week in 1 Corinthians 13. Love, as we have seen repeated over and over in text after text over the last several weeks, is what we have been saved for...

...with knowledge and all discernment...That knowledge that Paul is speaking of is knowledge of God. Real love grows in the soil of the true knowledge of God. Paul's idea of knowledge, the way that he used the word, was a kind of full or intimate understanding of God that comes from experience and from personal interaction with God in prayer and through the study of His

Word – knowing God as He is and not how we may want Him to be. This is where pop Christianity and all these pseudo-books about God war against the very reason we have been recreated and saved. They offer up imagined versions of God and war against the true knowledge of God and therefore against love for God. Paul wants their love to abound more and more but he wants it to be shaped and molded by a deepening personal communion with God in prayer and in His word. God defines love for us.

Moreover his desire is that that love would be expressed in wise and proper and good and spiritually helpful ways toward those whom you love. In other words, that we would ask the question, “How do I best love this person? How can I best serve them? In light of God’s love for me, how do I pour myself out most helpfully for them?” Biblical love is intelligent and active and strong love. Paul prays for abounding love, marked by knowledge and discernment, for this reason

...so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ... The word that is translated as “approve” is a word that means to “put to the test, to examine”. The idea is that of examining all of the options that are open to us and choosing the one that is excellent, that is what is most worthy, the best way to live in light of God and His glory. People do this sort of testing all the time. People who see money as surpassing all other things are continuously examining their lives with the goal of maximizing their wealth. Those who see pleasure as surpassing all other things are continuously examining their lives to maximize pleasure. Those who see health as the supreme treasure examine their lives in order to maximize their wellness. You get the picture. Likewise, someone who is motivated by God’s love will examine their lives, examine the options open to them, examine their choices and test those things according to this question: which expresses most fully my love for God and my love for others. Paul’s prayer is that he Philippians would strive to approve the things that are excellent, the things that are most consistent with the love of God and so would live lives that are pure (that is without hypocrisy) and blameless (absent of offense) until the day of Jesus Christ’s appearing. If this were the case, they would be

...filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. It was Paul prayer for the Philippians and it my prayer for us as well. I long for us to grow in our love for God, in our love for one another. I long for us to grow in our knowledge of God, in our understanding of His glory, of His power, of his love and grace, of His ways and of His purposes. I pray that we will grow in discernment so that we will approve and live according to what is excellent and righteous so that our lives will be continually marked more

and more by purity and holiness before the Lord. I pray that our lives will be filled with the fruit of righteousness that alone comes through Christ –the marks of salvation and new life in Him so that we will be a testimony to the glory and the praiseworthiness of God who has loved you and has “loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10, ESV) I pray that we will have a life that is marked by these characteristics of a ransomed soul – chief among them abounding love for God and for others. My heart resonates with Paul when He says: (1 Timothy 1:5, ESV)

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