

WHEN GOD IS FINISHED

Scriptures: Philippians 1:1-11; 3:12-16

I once read a prayer by a boy named Daniel. He said,

Dear God, thank you for my parents, my sister Anita, and for my grandma and grandpa. They are all real warm and special. I forgive you for my brother Jeff. I guess you didn't finish working on him.

This is strikingly similar to Paul's prayer for the Philippians. Paul is genuinely thankful for the Christians in Philippi. At the beginning of the letter in verses 3 and 5 he says, "I thank my God every time I remember you, ... because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now." Compared to some of his other letters in the Bible, Paul is effusive with praise for the Philippians. In verse 7 he says, "It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel."

At the end of the letter we learn that the Philippians have sent a major gift for Paul's support while he is in prison. Where other churches sometimes abandoned the apostle Paul when he ran into opposition, the Philippians supported him, even when he was unfairly jailed by the Romans. The Philippians were the kind of church any pastor or Presbytery executive would love: healthy, growing, and generous in their giving to mission, kind of like Hamblen.

But if you read Philippians carefully, you will discover that there are problems in the Philippian church. In chapter 1, verses 15 and 17, Paul says,

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill; ... the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment.

In other words, there are people in the church more interested in protecting their domain and advancing their own agenda than serving the mission of Christ. I know you have a hard time imagining that could happen in a church, but it does.

In chapter 4, verse 2, Paul says, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." Wow, there is a cat fight between two leaders of the women's association. It must have been a good one for Paul to mention them by name in his letter. Paul pleads with these two women, Eudoia and Syntyche, to put aside their differences for the sake of Christ.

The problems are even worse in chapter 3, verses 18-19. Paul says, "For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things." We are not told who these people are, but they were more focused on their own material success than the success of the gospel, and the Philippians are being sucked in to their mindset.

So why is Paul so thankful for these people? Why is Paul so excited about this church full of conflicted hypocrites? Is it because Paul is naïve? No. It is because Paul is hopeful. Paul believes that God is not finished with them yet. Listen again to Philippians 1:6. Paul says, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” The day of Jesus Christ refers to the day when Jesus will return and the kingdom of God will come. God may not be finished with us until we get to heaven, until the kingdom of God comes. But in the meantime God is determined to keep working on us, and that work of God will make a difference. In verses 9-10 Paul says, “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.” When Jesus returns we will be finished works, but as we move toward that day, God has the power to shape in us even now the beginnings of new life in Christ.

The best example of this is Paul himself. Paul grew up as a Pharisee, trying to secure his relationship to God by perfect obedience to the Old Testament law. But when he met the risen Jesus, Paul realized that he could never be righteous enough through his own works to earn a place in the kingdom of God. He needed the forgiveness and grace of Jesus Christ. So in chapter 3 he says to the Philippians, “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

But even after he became a Christian, even after he was baptized and joined the church, Paul knew that God was still not finished with him. So later in chapter 3 he says,

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own (referring to the goal of new life in Christ); but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Today we are receiving new members into our church, including the baptism of a one year-old child named Benjamin. Sometimes people wonder why we baptize young children in our church. One year-old children are not old enough to make a commitment to Christ. They are not old enough to understand what that means. They do not have the skills to share their faith with others or serve others in the name of Christ. They can't do very much; in fact they need more help than they can give. So why do we baptize young children?

Because all of us, like Benjamin, are a work in progress. I am sure that little Benjamin does not yet understand what it means to be baptized and belong to Christ. But I am not sure that his parents do either, or any of the other adult new members, or any of us. And when it comes to sharing our faith with others or serving others in the name of Christ, don't we all have some growing to do? We baptize Benjamin because all of us, like him, are a work in progress. We all need to “grow up” into the mature and right relationships that God wants us to have through Jesus Christ.

The same is true for our church. In many ways our church is like the church of the Philippians. I thank God every time I remember you. Maybe I should not tell you this, but I

thank God every day for giving me this job allowing me to be the pastor of this church. As Paul says in verse 7, “It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me.” That is how I feel about this church.

But you know, God is not finished with us yet. Over the next few months we will call an interim associate pastor to our church and later a new permanent associate pastor. That person will help us grow in new ways, just as Robin has helped us grow in the past. We have the opportunity, as Paul says in verse 9, to let our love “overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight.” We have the opportunity to grow in grace, and one of the ways we will grow is through welcoming, getting to know, and working with these new members. We will also grow by welcoming, getting to know, and working with a new person on our church staff. Even the bumps in that process can be a means by which we grow in grace, helping us become more tolerant, more forgiving, and more faithful, as well as broadening our perspective on what it means to follow Christ. We really cannot lose, if we are prayerfully open to God’s Holy Spirit. No matter what happens, God can use it for good to shape in us the life of Christ.

In *Prince Caspian*, the second book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the four children from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*: Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, are summoned back to Narnia to help a Narnian prince. On their journey Lucy finds herself in a forest with trees that dance, and there she once again meets Aslan, the great lion who symbolizes Jesus. C. S. Lewis writes,

But for the movement of his tail he might have been a stone lion, but Lucy never thought of that. She never stopped to think whether he was a friendly lion or not. She rushed to him. She felt her heart would burst if she lost a moment. And the next thing she knew was that she was kissing him and putting her arms as far around his neck as she could and burying her face in the beautiful rich silkiness of his mane. ...

“Welcome, child,” he said.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That’s because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger” (pp. 135-136).

Every year that we grow in Christ we will find that God gets bigger. And every year that we let God become a bigger part of our lives, we will grow up a little bit more into what God wants us to be when God is finished.

- Ken Onstot
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