



A Passion for the Gospel:
Saying Thank You With Love
A personalized meditation on Philippians

Rebecca McDougall

A Passion For the Gospel: Saying Thank You With Love

Sometime early in my life I understood that the income we had as a missionary family came from the gifts of others. In fact, every month when their financial statement from the mission came in the mail, my parents sat down and wrote a personal thank you note to each supporter. When I got older, my parents would ask me to write the thank you notes from time to time. I would write one, then copy it twenty-five or thirty times, address the envelopes, put on the stamps, send them. I don't remember what I ever said, except to express thanks warmly and sometimes longwindedly. Who knows what my ten-year-old mind thought was significant?

~~~~~

When I was young I thought of Philippians as a book about joy, because the word is repeated often. But later I began to realize it's a lengthy thank-you note to the Philippian church. It's a thank you to the wealthy, worshipful, business-savvy, hospitable Lydia. It's a thank you to the rough jailer who fell trembling at Paul's feet and begged to know how to be saved. It's an epistle of gratitude to the slave girl who was set free from her demons. And love to all the others who came after them, and through them into the family of God. Together, these compassionate believers had sent a gift with Epaphroditus to Paul, who was in prison for preaching the gospel that had set them free.

What could he give back? People in prison don't own a lot, can't do a lot. But his wealth was the kind that could never be taken away, and could be given in a letter. So just as they had sent material treasure to ease his physical needs, he also sent them from his treasure, to supply their spiritual needs. And I, in my need, generations later, am supplied, nourished, blessed, guided, strengthened, inspired, and challenged by that same "gift that keeps on giving." How I thank a wise God who loved me enough to save me, and to give me the generous gift of this thank you note.

I want to soak it in now, personalize it till my very bones are filled with rich strength, rub it into the skin of my heart till it beats sweet with the fragrance of Christ.

.....

Paul has Timothy with him, and gives him equal status and honor; they speak with one voice. Such loyalty, love, humility. They both serve the same King, Christ Jesus. Not only do they honor each other, but they also honor the new believers in Philippi by recognizing them as saints, and they honor the levels of authority and responsibility in the household of God by mentioning the elders and deacons as separate groups.

Like Paul, let me honor younger missionaries as my partners. Let me give them a name, mention them as my fellow-workers. Like Timothy, let me serve humbly those above me. Let me appreciate those who hold offices in the church, knowing they carry on their hearts the burdens of the people.

.....

It's like Paul can't wait to say why he's so thankful for them. And to tell them about the constant grateful conversations he has about them with God in prayer. What is it that makes them so special? From the time he first met them until now, they share the same passion he has for the gospel. As hard as he's pulling in the direction of making Jesus known, they are, too. He has their enthusiastic support, not just because of who he is, but also because of what he does.

It's their passionate commitment to the gospel that makes him express that bold confidence, that God, who began a good work in them to make them a holy Bride to Christ, will be faithful to complete that work among them till Christ's return. They should know their destiny is not only secure, it's glorious. It's a glowing process initiated, carried out, and guaranteed to completion by an utterly reliable God.

Oh, how attached he is to them! Like a lonely traveler who finds a lifelong companion, he keeps explaining how deeply he loves them and why. It's an appropriate devotion. "I have you in my heart," he explains, "God is my witness how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus." Why? They are really together; they really love him; they really care about the gospel. God's grace has hit them both in the same way, so they both "get it." The gospel is so precious, so important, it's worth going to prison for, worth defending, worth living radically for.

.....

Start over. Personalize. All these observations are true, but let me make them mine, going deeper. Pray through this book. Talk to God through the things I see in Philippians. Speak to Him about what it is I want for them, for me.

My God and Father, give me a heart full of thanksgiving for the saints who send me gifts of support. Every time I think of these brothers and sisters, every time I remember them, let gratitude well up in me. Remind me of them at every turn, and when I remember, light my joyful prayer, rising like incense from a heart touched with the smell of their sacrifice. These are the ones who are my partners in the gospel! Oh Lord, as you have begun a good work in them of loving the gospel like I do, I am confident you will keep developing that work of grace to its full potential in them till the day Jesus returns.

It is so appropriate, so right for me to feel this way about them. We are connected at the heart, because they also have received your grace in the same way I did, to understand why the gospel is worth going to prison for, why it is worth defending, why it's worth living out. Lord God, you are my witness that I deeply yearn for them and long for their fellowship with the love of our Lord Jesus.

Here is my prayer for them, Lord: fill them up more and more with your love. Let that love be full of insightful knowledge, full of discriminating discernment. If their love is like that, they will recognize and eagerly choose the things in this life and world that are excellent, so they will be pure and blameless when Jesus comes back. That great love of yours that fills them will ripen their fruit: righteousness. Coursing like sap into them through Jesus Christ, your love and righteousness will result in glory and praise to you.

.....

Like Paul's imprisonment, it is so important that my supporters back home realize that these times I suffer "imprisonment" are actually part of your plan to advance your gospel, Father. Anyone who sees my limitations, whether he's a believer or an unbeliever, knows that I'm suffering these restrictions for Christ's sake. Most Christians, if they see that I'm physically limited, yet free to speak of Jesus, get braver and bolder to share your word without worrying about people getting mad at them or retaliating. After all, they have far fewer handicaps or threats against them than I do.

Just as in Paul's time, I know that there have been occasions that people began boldly sharing Christ because they were glad I was out of the way and now they could influence others instead. They felt envious and competitive. Father, how should I react to people like that? I choose to rejoice and be glad about their open witness. Regardless of their motives, they are carrying out my supreme passion! People are sharing Christ! So I am rejoicing in that result, purely glad. I hope my supporters can have this attitude, too, rather than feeling defensive on my behalf.

.....

Rejoicing is a constant decision I make, my God, believing that being able to visit them freely is a gift from your hand, through my supporters' prayers and the help of Jesus Christ's Spirit. Like Paul, I'm expecting that at the right time I'll return to see them. I believe that no matter the trials or humiliations of the missionary term, I won't really have any reason to be ashamed. After all, I trust I'll have courageously honored Jesus while living in this body, and I expect to do so right up to the time I die. In fact, living in this world, for me as for Paul, is Christ. It's about Him, in Him, with Him, for Him. And dying? That will be a huge windfall. That will be the beginning of my Real Life.

The thing about living on in this world is, I know I get to keep working fruitfully with Jesus, making Him known and seeing people come to know Him. But if you were to give me a choice about whether to die or live, I'm not sure which way I would go. It's really tough. On the one hand, I am longing to go be with Christ personally. That is far, far better than life in this world, with all these difficulties and limitations, temptations and restrictions. But on the other hand, these dear people of yours still seem to need me. So I'm pretty sure you want me to live on for a while longer, my dear disciples can be glad I'm still in the world with them, and keep progressing spiritually. Through me, Lord, I pray you will give them reasons to be delighted in Christ Jesus, when I get to go visit them again.

~~~~~

But oh, Lord, while we are still apart, please let them live in a way that's worthy of the gospel of Christ! That way, whether I come see them or not, I will hear that they are standing tough, united, pulling together in the same direction for the faith of the gospel, completely unafraid of anything their opponents might threaten. Mighty Father, demonstrate to those

opponents by the complete fearlessness of your saints that they are doomed to destruction and that these believers are destined for salvation from you.

Please teach them what you taught me a long time ago: One of the good gifts you unwrap to your children is that we not only get to believe in Christ but also to suffer for His sake. In your supreme generosity you give us the same common experience of facing the conflict, of having to declare the truth of the gospel to people who get angry when they hear it. Maybe the experience is a little easier for them when they think about the fact that I'm also walking through it, over here.

.....

So, Lord, since their encouragement in suffering is found in Christ, since their comfort flows out of your love, since they have the same Holy Spirit, since we share your deep affection and compassion with each other, please complete that good work you began in them. You know what would make me completely happy? If they would choose to be likeminded, all pulling in love in the same direction for the same goal. If each person would decide that everyone else is more significant than they are, so all rivalry and competition would evaporate.

Father in heaven, let them have the same mindset as the Lord Jesus Christ did. When He was with you in heaven, fully glorious and high and mighty, He didn't think He should hang onto His status or privileges when you asked Him to give them up. He stepped down and became a nobody, like someone's slave, squeezing into a human body. And after He became human, He lowered Himself even further by descending into the deepest, humblest obedience of all: accepting death, even death on a cross.

Oh, great God of the Universe! How could you resist the incredible beauty of such obedient humility, such total abandonment, such loving sacrifice? You did not wait one minute longer than was necessary, but responded with powerful delight by raising Jesus to the highest place in the universe, Naming Him with the supreme Name: Jesus. Oh, Lord Jesus, at your Name every knee will bow one day, in heaven and on earth and under the earth. One day everyone will say openly, whether joyfully or reluctantly, that You, Jesus Christ, are the Lord. When we all shout Jesus' name together, how you will rejoice and beam, how your splendor will shine all around for everyone to see, God my Father!

I can't wait to see that day.

.....

But meanwhile, here we are, in a dark world. Lord, work in my brothers and sisters to cause them to obey you, just like they did when I was there. Be at work in their hearts, desiring to grow and live out their salvation with fear and trembling because they have seen how exalted Jesus is and they don't want to be shaming Him or ashamed when they see Him. Let them know that both the desire they have to please you and the strength they receive to actually do your will is all coming from you.

Working out our salvation makes us grow more childlike and innocent, dear Father, so I pray that we will do your will like Jesus did, without grumbling or arguing with you about it. Simply, trustingly, responsively...let us walk clean and blemish-free through the twisted, crooked ways of our generation, shining like lights in the darkness of the world.

Lord, we can let go of so much that is passing away, we can shrug off so much that is unimportant, we can ignore trivialities, but give us hearts and minds to persistently hold out and hold onto your word of life. In the day when we stand together before Christ at His judgment seat, I want to be proud that my work wasn't useless; my life-race was run successfully. I don't care if I'm just poured out like a drink offering was on those Old Testament sacrifices, as long as it's for the progress of their faith, bringing shared joy and celebration. I am all about rejoicing in their progress and sacrifices for Christ, so I hope they can rejoice in their partnership with me, too.

~~~~~

Lord, Paul had his Timothy who could go find out how the Philippians were doing. There was something so special about that young man, who had such a genuine son's love for Paul and for the people Paul loved. Paul found him unique because so many other people were focused only on their own interests, rather than the things Christ Jesus cares about. But Timothy's thoughts, energy and resources were given to serving Jesus. So he was a reliable messenger. Lord, make me a loyal, faithful servant of Christ who brings comfort like Timothy did to Paul. Raise up many more Timothys to the Pauls of this world.

.....

Epaphroditus was also such a comfort. How I long to be like him, also. He was a brother, a family ally. He was a fellow-worker, a colleague. He was a fellow-soldier, a comrade. When he was sent from the Philippians, he brought messages and ministry, serving Paul in the place of those who could not be there themselves. Lord, how often the faithful messengers and supporters have come and ministered to our needs, sharing resources and loving on us lavishly. Sometimes, like Epaphroditus, they get sick. Sometimes very sick. Thank you so much that you have always had mercy on them and on us, so we did not have the sorrow of their death when they came. What a tragedy that would have been.

Lord, Colin and I love sending them back to the church, honored and celebrated and giving reports of all they saw and heard while they were with us. May the church family honor them for the risks and difficulties they endured along the way as they sacrificed to come minister to us.

.....

Father, I ask that you would remind these dear ones to rejoice in you. We constantly need to be reminded to do this because there are things that discourage us and drag us down.

There are people who prey on believers: aggressively pushing, harshly insisting, highhandedly demanding that your people keep their outward rules. We are truly your people and here are our qualities that demonstrate it:

- we worship by the Spirit of God
- we glory in Christ Jesus
- we don't trust in our pedigrees or our own efforts.

Like Paul, who had a whole list of reasons to feel self-confident, my God, I recognize that others might be impressed. From my earliest days I have had all kinds of spiritual pedigree, privilege and achievement.

But everything someone else might see as my status symbols I discount completely, as nothing compared to knowing and having you, my dear Lord Jesus Christ. You, and you alone, are my best and greatest gift, my highest goal and aim and blessing, and I don't care anything about any of what else I've had, only you. You are my goal as well as my life right now. In order to gain you let me keep giving up everything else.

.....



In the end, what I want is to be found in Christ. I don't want anyone to find me dressed in my own righteousness; my own goodness never did me any good at all! The only thing I want to have till the end, to be wrapped in--to be drenched in--is His righteousness, His absolute perfection and purity and goodness and holiness, covering and flowing around me from you, Father, received through my faith in your Messiah.

Having my existence in Jesus Christ means I have the greatest joy of all, that of getting to know Him intimately. I don't just know about Him, I actually get to feel what He felt when He was here on earth: I experience the dramatic, exhilarating power of His resurrection, and I get to share in the crushing pain, sorrow and humiliating shame of His sufferings. I am becoming like my Savior in His death, through whatever crushing circumstances and experiences you arrange for me to walk through, so that one day I will, like Him, physically rise from the dead. There are things I cannot understand about my Jesus until I experience them for myself.

.....

How well I know that I'm not yet perfect, not yet fully like my Savior and Lord. I am using all my energy, though, to press on, grab onto that goal and make it my own. What keeps me going is that I realize that Jesus Christ, in His great love, long ago grabbed onto me and made me His own! So, never thinking I've achieved perfection, I concentrate on one thing: The Goal. Knowing Him so well that I become fully like Him.

So I don't think about the past—whether my mistakes or my successes. Instead, I just keep my eyes looking up, listening to your voice that calls me higher and higher, closer and closer to heaven's prize and being forever with Christ.

.....

I wish everyone could grow into this perspective, so we would speak the same language when we share with one another, but I know many Christians are busy with a variety of ambitions and have different viewpoints than I do about their priorities in life. At the right time, I trust you will reveal to them the better goal, but Lord, please at least help them not to regress or compromise their integrity.

I'd love for them to imitate me, as well as all of your committed servants who live in a way that sets a good example for them of devotion to Christ. The tragedy is that there are leaders who are living heartbreaking lives, shockingly at cross-purposes to Christ's cross.

Their end: Destruction. They are ruining their own lives.  
Their god: Their own appetite. Food, feasting, luxury, pleasures.  
Their glory: What should bring them shame. Bragging about sin.  
Their thoughts: Centered on this world. Materialistic, trivial, temporary.

.....

Oh, Lord, don't let us imitate people like that! The truth about us is that our real country is heaven. Our real King is Jesus, who is coming back to get us. Our real hope is His return, and the transformation of these decaying bodies to be like His resurrected one forever. He is the one who has authority over this world and governs every single thing in it. So it won't be hard at all for Him to take us into the world to come, to live forever with Him in endless joy. That is what we will expectantly look forward to and live for.

Father in heaven, remind my supporters of that glorious future so they will focus and stand firm against all the pressure from other people and from their culture to live for this world instead of the world to come. They are my dearly loved friends, my joy and crown, so their unwavering persistence in focusing on Jesus is very important to me. Lord, help them, please!

.....

Paul had sisters in Christ who were at odds. His gentle urging to "agree in the Lord" touches my heart, as does his appeal to two peacemaking men to help them sort things out. He loves them because they have worked side by side with him in sharing the gospel. He calls on their nostalgic affection for the team they used to work with, and he reminds them that all of them have their name written in your book of life.

How often when I have a conflict with another believer I feel they are the enemy, or at least my opponent! I can so quickly forget the layers of history we have together, serving Jesus and making Him known. I can ignore the fact that both of us are headed to heaven, saved and sanctified by the same blood of the Lamb. Lord, remind me of these things that go so much deeper than temporary disagreements, and help me, on the basis of them, to "agree in the Lord." Being united in the gospel is so much more

important than winning an argument or being more important, fruitful or recognized than someone else. Make this true of all of us.

.....

Finally, let us rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ always. No matter what else is happening to us, whether good or bad, we can choose to joy in Him. After all, everything that is good about Him is true forever, and He is forever ours.

Lord, make our lives an adornment to the gospel of Jesus. Make us moderate, gentle. May these graces be evident to everyone who knows us, since you are near to each situation and there is no need for us to be harsh and rough.

When we feel anxious because there are things we can't control that might go wrong, Lord, immediately turn our hearts to you in prayer. Fill us with thankfulness as we recall to mind your kindness in the past, and guide our thoughts into specific supplications, specific requests we can formulate because of the kinds of anxieties that arise. Then, as we bring our concerns to you and lay them at your feet, let your amazing peace stand like a military guard around our heart and mind, protecting our thoughts and feelings.

.....

We want even our thoughts to adorn your gospel, Lord, so please help us train them to focus on what is true, noble or honorable, right, and pure. We want to fill our minds with things that are lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. From those thoughts will flow our priorities, choices, ambitions, and feelings. And then from all these will flow the actions and words that reflect the Lord Jesus.

Just like Paul, we want to set such a good example that people who know us will learn, receive, hear and see in us the life of Jesus lived out in such a way that they also can copy it. May our words and behavior be so closely patterned after Jesus that others who imitate us will become like Him, and receive your wonderful, covering, protective peace, too.

.....

It's always a joy to me, Lord, when people have opportunity to express their concern for my needs. I am not desperate when they can't contribute

to me, because I've learned, like Paul, to be content no matter what my financial circumstances are. There is a secret that you have taught me, Father, about retaining my equanimity I am in need or whether I have plenty, whether I'm living in rustic or luxurious conditions. I'm satisfied either way. When Christ is strengthening me, I can do all things. I don't have to have people's gifts in order to keep going. You are enough.

But what a joy that they want to share with me! Sharing in my troubles, sharing in your work, sharing in the spread of the gospel...how deeply our hearts are knit together because they do these things, far more than with casual friends. Lord, bless those who have followed my situation well enough to send help when it was needed. Please credit those gifts to their account in heaven with you, and repay them one day.

What they send me is plenty, enough to fill me with joy because it is a fragrant offering to you, my God, an acceptable sacrifice that you receive as through it were offered to yourself. Lord, here is my prayer for them: please supply all their needs fully, to the full extent that you have riches of Christ Jesus' glory. As they give to us, your missionaries, and as you then supply their needs abundantly, may you, our great God and Father, be raised up high and glorious before us, till we all adore you more and more.

.....  
Lord, please bless them with these greetings, and with whatever news they hear about the believers here, who greet them in Christ Jesus, even though they have never met. Keep reminding them that the family of God is growing because of the gifts they send me. Keep giving them that passion to see the gospel spread to the ends of the earth. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with each of them, filling their spirit.

I pray all this in Christ's powerful name,  
Amen.

Becca McDougall  
March 20, 2017