

Seeing Beyond Ourselves

Press On Series, November 21/22 | Philippians 4:10-23

Rob O'Neal, Senior Pastor

WHAT MAKES FOR A GREAT PARTNERSHIP?

Lewis and Clark had a famously successful partnership. What made their partnership great?¹

President Thomas Jefferson charged Meriwether Lewis to find the Northwest Passage, a hypothetical waterway across the continent to the Pacific Ocean in the early 1800s.

The trip took on new urgency after France sold the Louisiana Purchase to the United States.

Lewis asked his old commanding officer, William Clark, to join the expedition.

Lewis and Clark created maps, found routes, and built relationships with Native Americans.

They described nearly hundreds of plant and animal species new to science. They gave the first scientific descriptions of grizzly bears and prairie dogs.

They made it all the way to the Pacific Ocean and returned two-and-a-half years later as heroes.

They may not have found the Northwest Passage, but they opened up a whole new land to exploration. What made their partnership so successful?

Yes, they had common interests and worked well together.

They had different temperaments: Lewis was melancholy, and Clark was a natural leader.

Most importantly, the two men respected one another. By the time of the expedition, Lewis' career had advanced more quickly than that of his old commanding officer. He was then a captain, whereas Clark was a lieutenant. Lewis wanted his old CO to be promoted so that they could be co-captains of the expedition; however, the military refused. Undeterred, Lewis called Clark "Captain" in front of the team so that the team never knew one outranked the other.

Their mutual respect helped fuel their famous partnership.

Today we close with one last glimpse at the Apostle Paul's partnership with the saints in Philippi.

He began his letter by thanking God profusely for the saints in Philippi.

He ended his letter the same way he began it—with deep gratitude and joy.

Paul thought of the saints in Philippi as more than friends or even family. They were his partners in the gospel. What made the saints in Philippi such great partners? Let's look one more time at this great partnership.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Lewis-and-Clark-Expedition>

PAUL CLOSED WITH GRATITUDE FOR HIS PARTNERS.

In Philippians 4:10, Paul mentioned a gap that had emerged in the support he received from Philippi.

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.

The congregation in Philippi had been longtime financial and prayer supporters of Paul. However, there had apparently been a period of time when they were no longer supporting him, at least financially.

Nevertheless, Paul knew that the gap in their financial support did not imply that they didn't still love him, support him, or pray for him.

He simply said that there was a season when they couldn't express that support financially.

We don't know what disrupted their financial support.

Now they had started financial support again, and it gave Paul joy.

Anytime someone supports us in ministry, it gives us joy. It reminds us that we're not alone, and it feels like a blessing directly from God. So, we give God the praise for partners.

Consequently, in Philippians 4:11-13, Paul noted that he had learned to endure any type of conditions.

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Paul wrote that he was content despite his circumstances. Paul wasn't saying that suffering was irrelevant or that he liked to suffer. Paul had simply learned to take everything that God offered as a gift, a blessing, and part of God's bigger plan.

Paul said this on the backdrop of suffering great hardship. He had experienced periods where he went without financial resources. The New Testament (including Paul's own writings) reminds us that he faced hunger and want, plus danger, shipwreck, beatings, and attempts to kill him.

Paul said that all of those circumstances taught him something. Paul knew how to be humbled, and he knew how to be lifted up. This was the rhythm of life he described regarding Jesus himself back in chapter 2. Jesus humbled himself, and God lifted him up or exalted him. Paul had seen that same rhythm shaped in his own life.

In verse 12 Paul wrote that it was like learning a secret. The word he used here that is translated "secret" implied that he had received knowledge that only God knew and had now made available to him through the experiences of his life.

It's in this context that Paul wrote verse 13, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Paul meant that he can face any suffering in service to the gospel, because Jesus is constantly strengthening him.

The word Paul uses for strengthening is from "endynamoo." It means essentially to be given power. It is related to the word for power from which we get the word "dynamite." Paul was basically saying that he had been filled with dynamite or dynamic power so that he could face every bit of suffering that came his way. God would be his strength and provider.

Isn't that an amazing lesson? And wouldn't you like to learn that? That God will meet all of your needs and that you will never truly want for anything?

Then in Philippians 4:14-16, Paul reminded the saints in Philippi of their partnership through giving.

Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.

The saints in Philippi had been with Paul every step of the way. They had shared his troubles. Before we move past this though, I want you to remember in this moment that you are not alone and what an extraordinary truth that is. You are part of a fellowship of believers if you're a Christian and part of Valley or some other church. There are so many people in this world right now who don't have what you have. They don't have brothers and sisters in Christ; they are quite literally on their own. They may have a few friends; they may even have family. But friends and family can carry us only so far. The fellowship we have in Christ means that we must share our good times and bad. Isn't it good to be part of something like that today?

Paul's partnership with the saints in Philippi went all the way back to the beginning and lasted almost without interruption right to this point in Paul's life.

This reminds us that giving isn't a once-and-for-all kind of proposition. It's not something we start and stop at will. We don't really like to get into ongoing entanglements financially; we're reluctant to make commitments, especially right now. However, giving is a covenant we enter into, it's something we start and then keep on doing!

In Philippians 4:17-19, Paul noted that, through giving, the saints became partners with God.

Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Here's where we need to remind ourselves of the mechanics of the gift the saints in Philippi sent to Paul. Paul was in prison in Rome. While he was in prison, he was allowed to receive guests and work from jail; consequently, his ministry really continued even while in prison. However, he was responsible for paying his own expenses while in jail; someone had to pay his rent and provide him with meals and clean clothes. Paul had allies in Rome who were able to do the practical tasks for him. And the church in Philippi sent a financial gift to pay his bills and support his ongoing ministry. The gift was delivered by a man from Philippi named Epaphroditus. Epaphroditus chose to stay and help with Paul's practical needs that money couldn't provide.

Paul was implying that giving to him had actually been a meaningful act of worship to God. When they gave their financial gifts to Paul's ministry, it had been almost like offering a burnt animal sacrifice on the altar at the Temple in Jerusalem. He called it a "fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."

Paul was picking up on **Exodus 29:18**, which described the scent of a burnt animal offering and implied that God experiences it almost like a smell. It reads:

... and burn the whole ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to the LORD. It is a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the LORD.

Hebrews 13:16 adds that when we're generous with our time, talents, and treasures, it has an impact on God. It reads:

"Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

But as he encouraged the saints in Philippi to continue giving, he knew that it might become a burden to them. He knew that they would think, "Where will we get the money? How can we afford to give?" The saints in Philippi were struggling at this point, because they were experiencing persecution. In verse 19 Paul told them that God himself would supply their needs. And he reminded them that God's supply room doesn't run out. His riches are as vast as the glory of Christ. The glory of Christ never runs out; neither do the riches of God. Consequently, our means never run out either. Can you wrap your head around that promise?

Paul closed in Philippians 4:20-23 by celebrating the results of their partnership.

To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Giving takes our attention off ourselves. Before we give, it's easy to think that we earned everything we have, that it's ours, and that we deserve it. That's ludicrous.

Paul pulls our attention back to God and says that God gets the glory forever and ever.

Then Paul reminded the saints in Philippi of the impact of their partnership. He mentioned all the saints in Philippi; together they had planted a growing, vibrant church that led to multiple followers of Jesus where there had been none before. Their partnership did that.

Then he reminded them of the "brothers who are with me." Those are the saints in Rome. Paul had helped to grow and strengthen that church. By partnering with Paul, the saints in Philippi had been part of growing and strengthening the church in the heart of the Empire.

Paul closed with one more result of their partnership—the grace of Jesus. Paul and the saints in Philippi shared the grace of Jesus together, and the grace of Jesus was spreading because of their partnership.

GENEROSITY ENCOURAGES PERSPECTIVE.

We have a natural case of myopia.

Myopia is nearsightedness.

Myopia happens when our eyes don't focus the right way. We're able to see things up close clearly; however, we can't see things that are far away very well at all.

If you've got myopia, it's rarely a big deal. You get glasses, wear contacts, or have your eye corrected by a laser procedure.

The term "myopia" also refers to a lack of foresight, a lack of discernment. It means not being able to see things "out there" clearly.

Myopia is actually very natural for us. We focus very well on our own lives and troubles. We have a more difficult time seeing things and people "out there." We have a difficult time caring about other

people in our community. We have an even more difficult time caring about people farther away from us.

This pandemic season has made our myopia even more acute. We're more afraid and concerned with ourselves. We're less concerned with others and less able to see far away.

Generosity gave the saints in Philippi a much broader perspective.

The saints in Philippi joined Paul's mission through prayer, practical help, and financial support almost as soon as he left their town, and they continued almost without interruption right through to his final imprisonment.

Paul started the church in Philippi on his second missionary journey. Paul ended up in jail in Philippi. When Paul was released from jail in Philippi, the town officials asked him to leave.

Acts 17 tells us that Paul went through two nearby towns before coming to Thessalonica, where he continued preaching. Philippians 4:16 tells us that the saints in Philippi started sending gifts and help to Paul as early as his trip to Thessalonica.

Paul ended up in trouble in Thessalonica as well, so he went on to Berea where he was received more eagerly, at least at first. I bring up all these places, because they were all in the Roman province of Macedonia. Philippians 4:15 adds that, by the time he left Macedonia, the saints in Philippi were already supporting him financially.

The saints in Philippi immediately developed a passion for spreading the gospel to their own families and to their own town. That passion almost immediately spread outward to the people of their home province. And it quickly became a passion to see the gospel advance around the world through Paul's ministry.

They developed a much broader perspective than their own lives and location.

Generosity helps us to see beyond ourselves.

On my own, I don't naturally care about what happens in Thailand.

However, over the years I have known multiple missionaries to Thailand.

They have worked to share the gospel, reach unreached people groups, and fight human trafficking there.

Before I met these people, I would quickly scan past headlines that involved Thailand.

But now, when I see headlines about Thailand, I stop. I see and care about Thailand now.

Being connected to missionaries to Thailand helps me to see a bigger world out there and to feel connected to that bigger world. It starts to cure my natural nearsightedness.

When we see beyond ourselves, we are more likely to press on.

When we focus on ourselves, we tend to see our problems. Seeing problems tends to sap us of our strength and resolve to stand firm.

But generosity connects us to something bigger. It connects us to God's mission to save the world. It connects us to people who are living lives vastly different from our own, and helps us to have compassion on them, because they are lost and living in darkness. Generosity reminds us that God is working in this dark world and that God has made us the light to that dark world. And when I know that God is at work and I am light to the world, I can't stop. I have to press on.

GENEROSITY LEVERAGES POWER.

Paul's closing reminded us that the generosity of the saints in Philippi produced dramatic results.

Paul's final word about the saints in Rome, who are "of Caesar's household," reads almost like an afterthought, but it was actually an important cue that God was using the generosity of the saints in Philippi in a powerful way.

Back in **Philippians 1:13**, Paul wrote that he was in the custody of the Praetorian Guard and that he had been witnessing to members of that elite unit. It read:

... so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

Paul closed that loop here at the end in ways that the saints in Philippi would recognize.

The members of the Praetorian Guard were the emperor's bodyguards. The head of the Praetorian Guard had come to function as chief of staff for Caesar.

So, in closing, Paul was reminding the saints in Philippi that members of the Praetorian Guard's becoming followers of Jesus meant that they had access to Caesar's inner circle and that members of Caesar's own inner circle had even become followers of Jesus.

The Roman Empire was changing in dramatic ways, and the saints in Philippi were involved through their generosity. Anything Paul did, anything Christian members of the Praetorian Guard did, and anything Christian members of Caesar's household did to bring God honor and glory would add to the significance of what the saints in Philippi had done through their generosity.

Generosity also leverages power, because it turns out we can actually "take it all with us."

Many of us would love to find a way to take our precious possessions with us into eternity.

Paul says that, in a roundabout way, it is actually possible.

Paul's letter to the church in Philippi is a receipt in part. Paul wrote it to say, "You sent a gift to me for such and such an amount. I acknowledge that Epaphroditus gave me the entire gift."

In the ancient world, though, when one person did a favor for another, it created an obligation. That was the currency of ancient friendships. People did favors and expected favors in return.

So when the saints in Philippi sent a gift to Paul, he now owed them something.

Instead of implying that he would ever repay them himself, Paul transferred the obligation to God. He said that their gift was no longer given to him, but it was given as an offering to God. In saying that God would supply their needs, he was almost saying that God himself would repay them.

So giving in a sense takes something off our balance sheet on earth and puts it into a figurative balance sheet in heaven.

Of course, nothing can equal the grace and riches we are already given by God. But what an amazing thought! When we give, we are putting riches into heaven.

Are we leveraging power with our generosity? Or are we squandering treasures?

When we give, we change the world, and we change ourselves. We move our possessions and focus from earth to heaven. Are you leveraging your life right now?

Or are you hoarding things for yourself out of fear? The Bible indicates that when we hoard things for ourselves, we are squandering what we have. We're missing the opportunity to change the world, and our stuff rots in our hands, and causes our hearts to rot slowly.

GENEROSITY SUGGESTS GIVING.

The saints in Philippi gave through good times and bad.

In the beginning, at least some of the saints in Philippi were quite wealthy. Lydia, the first convert in Philippi, was a successful businesswoman with a large household.

At some point, though, the persecution impoverished the church there.

By the time Paul proposed an offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem years later, the saints in Philippi were poor. Paul asked them to give anyway, and they gave generously.

In writing to the much wealthier saints in Corinth, Paul told their story. In **2 Corinthians 8:1-2** he wrote:

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

The saints in Philippi gave through good times and bad.

As they gave, the saints in Philippi changed everything.

They launched churches throughout Macedonia.

They showed Christian love to the saints in Jerusalem.

They ensured that the gospel could reach Rome.

They did even more that we don't have time to address today.

The saints in Philippi changed the world.

And their generosity ensured that the gospel thrived in Philippi itself for centuries.

Our giving right now can change the world affected by the pandemic.

People are hurting. People aren't just hurting in our community or even in our country. They're hurting around the world.

We have missionaries in some of the most closed parts of the world.

They are serving people and sharing the gospel in the middle of dark days. People are seeing the difference Christianity makes. It's historic and almost biblical in proportion. Our missionaries are doing amazing things right now.

We can be like the saints in Philippi by standing alongside of them right now. Like Paul, they are stretched by the days we live in. They are doing with less and less.

That's why our entire Thanksgiving offering this year is going to our World Outreach Partners themselves. Every dollar you give to the Thanksgiving Offering is going to them, so that they can share the good news about Jesus in a world darkened by this pandemic.

When you give, you can change the world. Would you give generously to the Thanksgiving Offering and to our World Outreach Fund?

Our giving right now can change our own community.

Make no mistake. People right here are hurting as well. People here are anxious, lonely, afraid, and suffering.

People need what we offer. They need hope in Jesus Christ. They need us to serve them.

Valley is stretched right now financially. Giving is down for the year compared with last year. Giving is falling far short of what we expected. Giving is falling behind our expenses.

At the same time, we need to do more than ever. We are pushing into new online ministries. We are bringing people together in safe ways. We are keeping our ministries to kids and students going, because studies show that our kids suffer when they are isolated.

History teaches us that these are the kinds of days when God does the most amazing things to advance his Kingdom and build his church.

Our giving through this church can change this community right now. Would you give generously to the General Fund?

Our giving right now can change our own lives as well.

When we give, it leverages power.

When we give, it changes our perspective.

When we give, we have the ability to press on.