

**“Touching Heaven:
A PRAYER OF
THANKSGIVING”**

Philippians 1:3-11

*We are thankful for our community,
our confidence, and our hope.*

A sermon preached by
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Did you get out to see the solar eclipse this week? In case you were hibernating, last Monday was a total solar eclipse that spanned the continental United States. Solar eclipses are not that rare, but this was the first one in nearly a century that had traversed such a large cross-section of our country. It was a major event, hundreds of thousands of people traveling to the path of totality to catch a glimpse for three or four minutes of the sun completely blocked by the moon.

It was truly impressive, even at the 90% or so we saw in Fort Smith. I got to look at it through some special glasses, but then we could also see the most amazing phenomenon on the sidewalk by the church. Underneath the trees, in the shade, there were hundreds of little crescents of light corresponding to the eclipse. It was crazy!

Speaking of crazy, the eclipse also brought out the so-called prophets and internet preachers who claimed the eclipse was a sign of God's judgment on America. One guy predicted the eclipse might set off earthquakes as it crossed the various fault lines in America's landscape. Others suggested it would be a great time for Jesus to return. Didn't happen.

When the eclipse was over, I felt thankful. I was thankful it had not triggered the apocalypse. I was thankful I was not in a massive traffic jam of people leaving the path of totality. But most of all, I was thankful that we have a God who made a universe of such intricate beauty and complexity, that we get to experience something like that in our lifetime. It was a "wow, God" moment.

If you missed it, wait around. We will see another one on April 8, 2024—in just seven years—and Fort Smith will be on the very edge of totality. Save your glasses.

We have so much to be thankful for, don't we? From the world of nature to relationships to material blessings to the spiritual life, God has been so good to us. Paul was very much in touch with his gratitude when he wrote the Letter to the Philippians. Of all the churches he founded, it seemed like Philippi was his favorite. He loved those people. Philippi was his first church established on the European

continent. It was located in a major commercial center in the Empire. The people there loved Paul and continued to support him with prayer and gifts long after he moved on.

So when Paul writes the Philippians a letter, you can feel the warmth of thanksgiving. Paul's epistles generally follow the usual pattern of letters written in ancient times. They begin with a greeting, then there is a statement of praise or thanksgiving. In secular letters, this was usually a word of praise or gratitude to the recipient of the letter. But in many of Paul's letters, this thanksgiving becomes a prayer, commending the church to God and thanking God for all God's blessings. That is certainly the case with Philippians.

Paul first of all thanks God for this community of faith: *"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.... 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. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus."*¹ Wouldn't those words warm your heart, to hear them coming from someone who meant so much to you?

We need those kind words in our lives. We need to hear words of encouragement. We need to know somebody appreciates us like that. Psychologists tell us that two basic social needs we have are to be liked and to belong. That's what the community of faith is all about: affection and acceptance.

Christian friendship goes much deeper than the affection of the world. Our fellowship is based on the love we share, which is the love of Jesus Christ. That love overcomes any barrier the world puts in front of us—race, gender, class, education, nationality, socio-economic condition, whatever. Paul was able to enjoy Christian fellowship with the Philippians, who were of a different country and culture, yet they shared together in the bond of Christian love.

One of the most famous friendships from the world of sports was the relationship between two football players for the Chicago Bears, Gale Sayers and Brian Piccolo. Both were excellent athletes, but over forty years ago, they shocked some people by also being great friends. You see, Gale Sayers is black, and Brian Piccolo was white. Such a friendship is not so unusual now, but back then the reporters were constantly asking Gale and Brian about the racial issue, and they always handled it with grace and humor.

Then Brian Piccolo was cut down in his mid-20's with cancer. Gale Sayers stayed his supportive friend until the very end. Shortly before Brian died, both of them were supposed to go with their wives to the Professional Football Writers Association banquet in New York City. Gale Sayers was to receive the George Halas Award as the most courageous professional football player of the year. Brian was too sick to make the trip. But when the moment came for Gale Sayers to accept the award, he stepped to the microphone with tears unashamedly rolling down his cheeks and said, "You flatter me by giving me this award. But I tell you here and now that I accept it for Brian Piccolo. Brian Piccolo is the man of courage who should receive this award. I love Brian Piccolo, and I'd like you to love him, too. Tonight when you hit your knees, please ask God to love him."²

Friends stick with us in our times of trouble. Real friendship goes beyond the boundaries of polite relationships. Friends will even risk their lives for the ones they love. John Maxwell tells the story in one of his books about two men, Jim and Phillip, who had been friends since childhood, going to high school and even college together. After college they joined the Marines and were assigned to the same unit and sent to Vietnam, where they fought side by side.

One day, during a fierce battle, the unit was given the command to retreat. Everything was chaos, with bullets flying and bombs going off and aircraft zooming overhead, and in the midst of all the confusion, Jim noticed that Phil had not returned with the unit. Panic gripped his heart. He started back into the field of fire, but his commanding officer

stopped him, saying it would be suicide. But Jim disobeyed and ran back into the gunfire, yelling out Phil's name. A few minutes later, Jim hobbled back to the retreat position, carrying the limp body of his friend.

The commanding officer shouted at Jim that his rescue mission was a foolish waste of time and risky and insubordinate. "Your buddy is dead," he said. "There's nothing you could do."

"No, sir, you're wrong." Jim replied. "I got there just in time. Before he died, he looked at me, and his last words were, 'I knew you'd come.'"³

We are in community today because Jesus came for us. He told his disciples, "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*"⁴ He came, and he gave his life for us, and rescued us from death. We can be friends today, despite any apparent differences, because of him. Jesus is the Source of our community; he is the Soul of our church; he is the Spirit of our fellowship. We have love for one another because he first loved us. When we are lying wounded on the battlefields of life, we don't have to fear. We know there is help on the way, because we are part of a community, and we are thankful.

One of the things that really strikes me about this prayer of thanksgiving is the confidence of Paul. His enthusiasm is insurmountable. He 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.*"⁵ His confidence is all the more striking because Paul is writing this letter from prison. Most scholars think Paul was in Rome, awaiting his execution. Even if he was in prison somewhere else, it was still a frustrating and depressing place to be.

But Paul goes on in the letter to say that his imprisonment has given him opportunities for the spread of the Gospel, as he has had a chance to witness to the Roman guards. Even acknowledging that perhaps his death is near, he still has a positive outlook. He says, "*It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but*

that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.”⁶ That’s confidence!

We have plenty of reasons not to be confident: grief, illness, anxiety, conflict, depression, all those troublesome things in life. Sometimes it seems like the circumstances of our lives have us locked up in prison. But we can still live with confidence and enthusiasm, because we know that circumstances are not the master of our lives. God is! And if God is for us, who can be against us? We have confidence, not in ourselves, but in the providence and the power of God. We are not on our own. We belong to God, and God is faithful. You can be sure of that. God can take the worst circumstances and bring blessings to the situation, bring good out of evil. Remember, *“We know that in all things, God works for good together with those who love him.”*⁷ That assurance gives us confidence!

Once there was a man who was shipwrecked on a desert island. He was the only survivor. He cried out day by day for God to send some help to save him, and every day he scanned the horizon for hours, but nothing came. Eventually he was able to build a small hut for shelter and to gather all his meager belongings under a roof. But one day, he came through the jungle after foraging for food, only to discover that his fire had somehow ignited the hut, and everything he had worked for was going up in flames. That was the last straw. In total despair, he flung himself on the beach and cried until he passed out from exhaustion.

The next morning the man felt a poke on his shoulder and rolled over to see a sailor and a crew and a boat that had come to rescue him. Totally surprised, he said, “How in the world did you know I was here?”

“What do you mean?” the sailor replied. “We saw your smoke signal.”⁸

God can turn our negatives into positives, our pains into gains, and our scars into stars. That’s what God does. Living in that confidence, we can become extraordinary people. Listen to what 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."⁹ As we grow in the love of God, living with confidence in his grace and guidance, we know more, we understand more, and we can discern better and better what God's will for our lives is. That just continues to build our confidence. Thank God for that!

Finally, we pray thankfully today because we have a great hope in God. Paul paints the picture for us: "*So that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*"¹⁰ When Jesus comes to claim his kingdom, and when we stand before our Lord at the end of time, we can stand with confidence, not in ourselves, but in his love, his grace, his forgiveness, and his salvation. The harvest of his righteousness in us will be the kingdom of heaven. We know that; we believe that; we can depend on that. We know the end of the story, and that faith gives us hope every day we live.

Hope is like watching recorded games on your DVR. I like to watch sports on TV, especially football and basketball. But I don't have time to listen to a bunch of commercials or commentators yapping all through half time. Through the miracle of technology, I can record the game and zip through all the fluff and just see the contest itself. Best case scenario, I can start the game late and finish it about the time it is over in real time. But sometimes I'm not quick enough, and the game ends, and I see the score before I watch the game.

But that's OK, too. If I find out my team got clobbered, I don't have to watch it at all. Lots of time and frustration saved. If they just barely lose, I can watch the game without getting my hopes up for a victory. But if my team won, I can watch the game to see *how* they won and celebrate the victory. I don't have to worry about the possibility that they might lose. I can relax and enjoy the game without anxiety. Any way you slice it, knowing the outcome can be a positive thing.

By faith, we know the end of the salvation game. God is going to win! We don't have to worry. We can relax. No anxiety. If we live in him and love him and depend on him and walk with him the rest of our lives, we will win the victory with him. We will obtain the harvest of righteousness. We will live forever in heaven with our Lord. That is our hope, and that is our encouragement day by day.

I am thankful today. I am thankful for a community of faith where I can find the love of God and Christian friendship. I am thankful today for the confidence that God will complete God's work in me in spite of my difficulties. I am thankful today that I have a hope for the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Are you thankful today? Then pray with me: Eternal God, we are so thankful today. We thank you that you have provided everything we need for a great life--blessings in abundance, strength for our trials, healing for our hurts. We thank you for the hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ; that gives us joy beyond measure. We thank you that we can live in confidence because you are our God. We will serve you in thankfulness all our days. Amen.

¹ Philippians 1:3-5, 7-8.

² Quoted by Bruce W. Theilemann, "Telltale Tears," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 40.

³ John C. Maxwell and Dan Reiland, *The Treasure of a Friend* (J. Countryman Books, 1999), 27f.

⁴ John 15:13.

⁵ Philippians 1:6.

⁶ Philippians 1:20.

⁷ Romans 8:28.

⁸ John Yates, "An Attitude of Gratitude," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 110.

⁹ Philippians 1:9.

¹⁰ Philippians 1:10-11.