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The National Presbyterian Church

# The Unforgettable Song

Philippians 1:29-2:11

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This is the third sermon in a series of messages we are preaching on St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians. We've entitled this series, "Sheer Encouragement." In the opening sermons that we've looked at in chapter one, we see Paul praying for the Philippians. And then we see Paul saying, "Don't worry about me." In fact, it's almost humorous, as he starts that section by saying, "I've been in a lot of prisons. Some very bad ones and I've been stoned," and that sort of thing, "But now, I'm with the Praetorian Guard. I have the best of all the prisons. I'm able to share the Gospel with the imperial guard here in Rome." That's a clue as to what prison he's actually in, in the Roman prison. He's in the one that's underneath the Roman emperor's villa in the Roman Forum, so he shares that. He shares the fact that he faces stress like the Philippians face stress, but he urges them not to panic. He actually uses the word panic, "Don't panic. And then take your share of suffering, along with me, and have confidence that God is going to see you through." Then the word "encouragement" appears; actually, this word that we've titled as the theme of the whole series, "Sheer Encouragement." That word appears now in the second chapter. So let's take a look at the second chapter.

"If there is, then, any encouragement," the word "encouragement" is a Greek word *parakletos*. It's interesting in its use in the New Testament. *Parakaleo*—*kaleo* means "to call;" "to call alongside." It literally means "to come alongside." And that's the word our Lord uses in John 14 when he promises the Holy Spirit. He says, "I will not leave you orphans. I will send the Comforter, the one who will come alongside you, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth." He uses this word *parakletos*; that's why we often refer to the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete, the one who comes alongside, because

that's the word Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit, the one who comes alongside of us. And now that's the word used here, with regard to us.

"If there is any encouragement—" by the way, Paul likes hypothetical sets; like, he'll say, "If there is this, if there is this, if there is this," and he'll do that in the fourth chapter, too. But notice, he'll do it here now. "If there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation from love, any sharing in the spirit, any compassion—" now this is one of the strongest of all the love words in the New Testament vocabulary. It's the word our Lord uses when he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan had compassion on the one who fell among the thieves. It's a very powerful love word in the New Testament. It means to love from your very center towards someone. "If there is any compassion—" and now, the word for "mercies" appears. Your new RSV translates it "sympathy", but it's actually the word *mercies*. "If there is any mercy, make my joy complete by being of the same mind." The word for mind here is the word *psyche* or *psuche*. It's the word for "soul" in the New Testament. It's the word that has to do with the deepest sense of who you are. And so, actually, he's saying, "Make my joy complete by being soul mates." That's actually what he's saying—have the same soul together, be soul-mates. We use that phrase even in modern usage ourselves, "This person is a soul mate with me." That means that we, at our very essence, we share at a very deep level the same values, the same high goals. So he says, "Make my joy complete by being of the same soul, being soul mates."

And then he goes on to say, "Having the same love, and being in full accord and of one mind." Now, a different word is used for mind and that is the Greek word *phroneo*. We use that in modern medicine to refer to the frontal part of the brain, the executive part of the brain that develops your perspective on life; that thinks. So it is a thinking word. And he says, "Have the same perspective—" now, he's going to repeat that word again in a very decisive way in just a moment— "have the same love, being of one accord and of one perspective." He wants you to be a soul mate, and now he wants you to think with a similar perspective with one another. "And do nothing from selfish ambition," notice he is giving advice to these wonderful friends at Philippi. He's trying to encourage them. That's what this book is all about. They had encouraged him. They sent the young man, Epaphroditus, all the way to Rome to take care of Paul, and by the way the reason this book is written is because Epaphroditus, the young man sent from Philippi to help Paul in prison, becomes ill. Paul decides to send him back, and so that's why we get the letter. The

letter goes with Epaphroditus back to the people of Philippi. Paul is thanking them in this letter, for helping him and being an encourager in his life. And so as he writes back, he is now encouraging them to encourage one another, as they encouraged him. He urges them to encourage one another.

So notice, again, all this wonderful language. If there is any encouragement, if there is any consolation, if there is any mercy and compassion for one another, have the same soul, be soul mates, and have the same outlook on life with one another. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, regard others as better than yourselves." It's the way the NRSV puts it. Now, that's a problematic sentence. It's problematic to understand exactly what he means. So he says, "I don't want you to have conceit and I don't want you to be focused on just yourself, your own interest, your own selfish ambition, but I want you to count others," he says, "better than yourself."

What does he mean? This has been misunderstood by some interpreters. Does he mean that you should see that you don't have value and other people have more value than you have? Is this a value sentence? Is that what Paul is saying? Is that what Christian piety is? I'm supposed to feel very badly about myself, I'm a worm and everybody else is great. Is that what this means? In a family, is that what I'm supposed to do, to make other people feel that they're of greater worth than I am? No, that's not what he means.

Actually, he's using a first-century saying. We found this out, in reading first-century documents, that Paul is using a saying that the people would understand. It all hinges in the word "better." It doesn't mean better qualitatively. It means "better in position, or in line". So in a sense, this is a first-century saying that's saying, "I want you to encourage one another. I don't want you to be totally focused on your own ambition. I don't want you to be conceited, but I want you to put others in front of you in line, in humility." And humility, that's the key word, put others ahead of you in line. That's exactly the context of this sentence: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility, put others ahead of you in line. Look not to your own interest but to the interest of others."

Let me see if I can explain this. I have an illustration that I dreamed up, that will help you understand what Paul is getting at. Supposing, you and your family were going to go out to the beach. It's a Saturday. Saturday is a very busy day. And you realize, on your way to the beach, that you don't have any sunblock. And that is

essential when you go to the beach. So you stop off at Safeway. Now, this is a white-knuckle story. You stop off at Safeway. You're the dad who runs in to get sunblock lotion so that we can go to the beach. And your wife says, "Don't do any impulse-buying, Dad. Just get the one item."

And so you dash into Safeway. The family is out in the car, probably the car is still running. You go in to get this one item so you can get to the beach. Now, I have a problem. What line do you get in at Safeway? You have one item you need to buy. I've learned from experience, don't go into the "nine only" line, or the "15 only" line. They want you to go there, but don't do that because that line snakes around the entire store. And it'll be your luck that somebody with coupons— oh, by the way, try never to get behind anybody with coupons. Because they're going to be cashing those all in, and they'll do that in a "nine only" line, too, so be careful.

So what do you do? I've used this rule of thumb. Go to a line where the ordinary people are with huge baskets completely filled, but check a line where one checker is just about finishing with one person's huge basketful, and another person is right there about ready to start, and stand behind that person, respectfully, and not in a demanding way. Believe me, that will backfire. But stand there and hold the one item so that the person can see that you have just the one item and no coupons. You might holler out the door, "Honey, I'm coming. That's all right, I'll be— I just have one item to bring, but I'll be there." Maybe your son can work with you on this and stand at the door and say, "Hey, Dad, we're waiting for you out here, okay?" That's a little theatrics, but you can do that, too. Don't be demanding, though. Just stand innocently.

Here's what will happen—this often happens. It will never happen in a "nine only" line, but it could happen in the big line. And a person who's got a whole cartful right in front of you, and sees you with the one item and he or she says, "You just have that one item?" "Yeah." "Oh, honey, go ahead. Go ahead." They put you in front of their position in line.

Now, I want to stop for a moment. I want to analyze psychologically the person that just said that to you. Let me ask you a question. Does that person feel good about themselves, or bad about themselves? They feel good about themselves. It's true. They're not Type A. They feel so good that they're able to put you in front of them in line. Notice, that's the whole context of what Paul's saying. Because you're encouraged, because you feel compassion, because you have yourself experienced God's love, then don't focus on your own interest. Focus on the interest of others.

You now can do it. You feel so good about yourself.

See, this is not a text that says you should feel bad about yourself and therefore everybody should be more important than you are. No! That's bad theology. That's not taught anywhere in the New Testament. Rather the New Testament ethics is "Beloved, Let us love one another." You first are experiencing love. And now Paul says, because of that love, you can defer to others. You could put someone actually in front of you in line.

Now, the person that does that at Safeway feels very good about themselves. What they did was not something that was a pure justice decision. Pure justice would go like this, you're standing there. They've got the cart, and if they see you would like to go in front, if they're a justice person, pure justice alone, they would say, "You wait your turn. I have been here for an hour shopping! You come in, Johnny-come-lately, and expect to go in front in line? You take your turn."

That would be pure justice. And they have a right to it. After all, they've been there all that time, doing careful comparison shopping and doing everything to get all those items. But when they say, "Hey, honey, you go ahead of me. I have been here an hour anyway. What difference would it make? I feel good about myself, expansive, and I want you to go ahead of me." And people will do that. People will put you in front not because they feel badly about themselves but because they feel good about themselves, and that's what Paul is getting at. Notice, the whole context isn't that the encouragers feel bad about themselves, but they have just experienced the love that comes from God and the result is grace that moves toward others.

And then the text goes on. He says, "Look to each other, not your own interest but to the interest of others. Have the same mind," and now he uses the word *phroneo* again, "that we have from Christ Jesus." Let me tell you what now happens in this text. Paul is giving ethical advice and he decides to illustrate it. And instead of illustrating it with a Safeway story as I did, he decides to illustrate it with our Lord himself, and he tells a poem. And this illustration of St. Paul's becomes more important than the original point he was making. Can you see how that happens? And Paul will now share with us the most famous passage in all of the Book of Philippians. It's called the Philippian Hymn because Paul will share now about Jesus Christ as an illustration of this love that enables us to put others in front of us and the illustration will take over the whole chapter. We have evidence that the early church lifted this song of Paul's out of the Book of Philippians, and sang it in Christian worship in the ancient church. They made a hymn out of this. That's why your NRSV puts

it in poetic form. It's a poem and Paul tells it to them. Listen to it.

He says, "Have this mind in you that we have in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God," the word *morphe* means the essence of God. Here's a great Christological passage: Jesus Christ was not created by God. He was with the Father in the beginning. He is the very *morphe*, the very essence of God, "who is in the essence of God did not count equality with God a thing to be" and the Greek word here is "grasped" or "held on to"—"but he emptied himself"—that's why we call this the *kenosis* hymn, he emptied himself—"and taking upon himself the form"—now the same word essence, again, *morphe*—"of a slave, not just a man." Jesus didn't just become a man. He became a slave man and in Greek society that means actually lower than ordinary human beings. He became a slave man. "And being found in human form"—now, he quotes, uses another Greek word *homo*. We get the word through the Latin of *homo sapien* from this word, "he became a man, a real man and he is also found in human likeness," which now the word *schema* which means he even looks like us. Jesus didn't look like some great angel that would surprise you. If you saw him, he would look like anybody else. Remember, Mary thought he was the gardener. He looked like us. So he became, he's the essence of man and the essence of God and he became a human being, a real human being and he even looked like us. "And being found in human form, he humbled himself," the very word that was used earlier, "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death." Notice this poem is going downward. He became obedient, he became a man, a slave man. He became obedient even to death, even death on the cross, the lowest of all deaths, the death of the humiliated, the death of the criminal. He came to the cross.

And now the poem moves to the other direction. "Therefore, God has highly exalted him," he uses the word *hyper* here. "God has hyper-exalted him and given him the name that is above every name." Notice, the poem has gone down to the cross and now, it's moving up, "has given him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus," notice his earthly name is the name now, not Christ, that's his title, "the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven, earth, and under the earth," that's the whole cosmology of the world, "every knee should bow in heaven, earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God, the Father." That is the great *kenosis* hymn, the great emptying hymn of Jesus Christ. It became the greatest part of the Book of Philippians, Paul's tremendous Christology affirmed.

Let me show something to you. You know it's a poem, but it's a poem that plays

on words. It's a perfect Greek poem that Paul has used here. There was one word earlier on I didn't alert you to. I want to alert you to it now. Remember Paul said, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit." You know what the Greek word for "conceit" is? Hold your breath. *Keno*, "empty," *doxa*, "glory;" "empty glory." That's conceit. Isn't that a great definition of conceit? If you've met a conceited person, he or she is the person of hollow glory. They're so impressed at themselves and nobody else is, that's conceit. Hollow glory and sometimes, they will insist on a lot of glory around them, but it's hollow, hollow glory. Empty, *keno*, *doxa*. That's the word for conceit. I believe that Paul used that word to trigger his poem here.

Notice "Let's have no one with conceit"—*keno doxa*—"think of Jesus Christ. He emptied"—*keno*—"himself." He emptied himself. He was equal with God. He is equal with God and yet he did not clutch at that. He came down, down into humanity, became a real man. Three ways Paul puts it. He became real, concretely a real man. "He came alongside of us, even to the cross. And God has highly exalted him and given him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord," hold your breath now, "to the *doxa* of God, to the glory of God, the Father." That's a perfect poem. *Keno doxa*, *Keno doxa*. It's a play on words. Conceit is *keno doxa*, empty glory. Jesus Christ didn't have that. He emptied himself, and God gave him the glory. *Keno doxa*, *keno doxa*.

What's the whole point of this? What has Paul done? I want to make just two reflections. First, Paul can't talk about any subject, he cannot talk about ethics, he cannot give you advice without relating it to Jesus Christ. Paul is a man in Christ. That's how he thinks. And any missional advice, any advice that he's going to give; it has a source in its center. He always points the center.

Karl Barth has a great line, "Tell me how it stands with your Christology, and I'll tell you who you are." Christology is the key to understanding the Christian faith. What do you believe about Jesus Christ? That will have a profound effect on your love. It'll have a profound effect in the way you look at other people. It has a profound effect on everything. And so Paul cannot talk about any subject without relating it to its center, and he does that here in the Philippian letter, and we're grateful for it. And so we get a great hymn as a result of it.

Secondly, you cannot put others in front of you in line unless you feel good about yourself. And this poem shows you why you feel good about yourself because Jesus Christ identified with you. He went all the way to the cross. He is the one. It's his

mind that we now look at. Because of his love, we are able to put other people in front of us in line. Have you done that? Are you able to do that? Our culture right now needs people who can put others in front of them in line. A lot of people are having great struggles right now, and what we need are a lot of people at Safeway or Whole Foods that are able to put others in front of them. We have to do it every day. We have to learn how to do it in families. We have to learn how to do it. It's what gives us happiness. Notice, Paul starts this whole passage by saying, "Complete my joy. Complete my joy by doing this." This is what will make you happy. This will produce happiness. Where do you get the ability to do it? You get it from Jesus Christ. He is the one that enables you to do it. At the close of service today, our great choir will sing, "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you." and "the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." The great blessing in the book of Numbers.

You know something interesting about that blessing? That blessing is a blessing of sheer Gospel because the word for "bless" in Hebrew means "bow" when it refers to us. "Bless the Lord, oh, my soul," it means "bow." But when the word refers to God, it means "stoop," and that's what that blessing is. The Lord stooped to you, and that blessing anticipates this song. God stoops down to us to show his face to us, his graciousness to us, and then he smiles. That's what "lift his countenance" means. He smiles on us, and that's what gives us peace, and that's how you can put others in front of you in line.

Thank you, Lord, for this great text. Thank you that it's so practical, that it has such a wonderful effect in our lives. May we experience this grace in our own lives, and may we be able to share it with others. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

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*Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.*  
*Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

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