



STRETCH

FOR MORE OF GOD'S PRESENCE AND PLAN

21 DAY FAST DEVOTIONAL



As a church family we set aside 21-days every year to seek God together through prayer and fasting. The following devotional was written by staff and volunteer leaders at Overflow Church for a time of fasting and prayer called Stretch. In this devotional, we'll dig into the book of Philippians and stretch for more of God's presence and plans for our lives.

I want to give a huge thank you to all those who contributed to this devotional. God is using your faithfulness, commitment, and gifts to impact others and we are so thankful for you.

For the reader, we hope and pray this devotional blesses you in your journey to passionately follow Jesus and joyfully serve others. May God stretch and fill you with more of His presence and guide your steps into His plans for your life.

Shalom,

Pastor Brian D Bennett

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DAY 1

BRIAN BENNETT

READ PHILIPPIANS 3:13-14



I grew up as an athlete and later became a coach. Through that process I spent many hours in training. Through all of the training I found that the time of stretching, before and after, a practice or a workout was the time I least enjoyed. It often felt monotonous and insignificant...a waste of my valuable time. It wasn't until my college years that I began to understand that stretching doesn't just prevent injuries, but positions the muscles involved for growth. All it took for me to become a fan of stretching was understanding that it could lead to more growth in my life.

The goal of our "Stretch" sermon series, 21-day fast, and devotional is to provide each of us with the tools that will help us grow in God's presence and as a part of God's plan. Today, we begin in Philippians 3:13-14 to lay the foundational focus for the journey ahead. The Apostle Paul writes, "No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us" (Philippians 3:13-14). These verses call us to the focused pursuit of passionately following Jesus.



What does it mean to stretch for more God's presence and plan for our lives? It means that we:

- **Forget (verse 13):** the Greek word means to forget, neglect, or overlook. What do you need to leave behind, or overlook, that is holding you back? You may feel guilty, or ashamed, even bitter or angry about your past. Paul had every reason to be stuck looking at his sinful past and yet he understood God was calling him (and us) to the next level.
- **Look Forward (verse 13):** the Greek word means to reach or stretch forward. We are told to forget (let go) and look (stretch) forward. Relay teams know that they cannot look behind them in a race. They look forward and stretch forward with the baton to hand off to the next person. We should learn from our past, but not live there. Just as a car has a larger windshield than rearview mirror, our life will be enlarged looking forward rather than looking back.
- **Press on (verse 14):** the Greek word means to pursue. What are you pursuing in life? If you are unsure what you are pursuing take a quick look at how you spend your time and money. Where we spend our most valuable resources tends to be our focus. Paul was passionately pursuing Jesus and calling us to have the same focus. Whatever we focus on will grow. When we make Jesus our center, and our true focus, we will grow in dramatic ways.

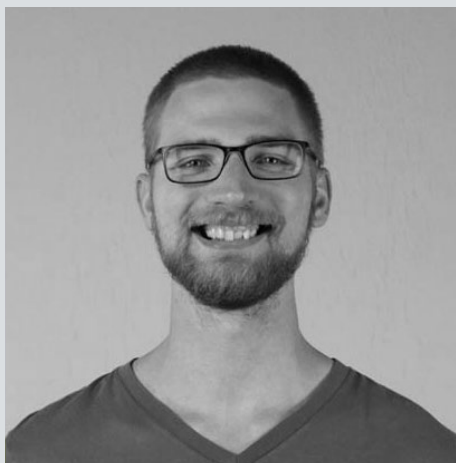
These next 21-days I pray that we are able to forget, look forward, and press on with Jesus as our focus. Fasting has a way of clearing out the clutter in our lives and bringing new clarity. I want to encourage you to commit to this "Stretch" journey by faith and to daily stretch for more of God's presence and plan for your life. We will find greater passion and joy on the other side as we grow with Jesus!



DAY 2

CHAD SCHEPERS

READ PHILIPPIANS 1:1-2



How we greet people shows how invested we are in the relationship. If we're meeting a close friend or family member we might call them a nickname or other term of endearment as we wrap them up in a bear hug. On the other hand if it's someone we barely know and haven't spent a lot of time with we may simply offer a "hello" and a handshake. The interaction that starts a conversation shows what type of relationship we have with them.

To open their letter to Christians in Philippi, Paul and Timothy greet them with "grace and peace." With this greeting these two went out of their way to endear themselves to the people who would receive their letter. Here's how: they knew two different types of people would be reading and hearing it. First, Philippi was a Roman colony and filled with Gentile, Roman people. The way that they greeted one another was with "grace." Instead of saying, "hello," to one another they said, "grace." A similar thing is going on with the second group of people that would receive the letter. The Jewish people who were also in Philippi (a minority group who were greatly outnumbered by their Gentile counterparts) greeted each other with, "peace."



“Grace and peace,” meant more to these people than just words. It meant that Paul and Timothy cared enough about them to say “hi” in a way that meant something to them. They took the time to make sure they knew who these people were and how to talk to them in a way that lifted them up.

What would it look like if we thought about the way we talked to one another with this kind of intentionality? Does your neighbor prefer brother/sister? Would the volunteers in the kids ministry like to be called by their first name? Could it make the day of a co-worker to actually use their name when you speak to them instead of shouting “hey!” across the shop floor?

What’s more is that this language wasn’t just about how to say, “hi.” It also bridged a divide. Jews and Gentiles typically didn’t get along. By greeting both in a meaningful way, Paul and Timothy mend a divide between two groups of people. May we be people who bridge gaps, mend divides, and intentionally engage others in a way that blesses them.



DAY 3

ANDREW WANG

READ PHILIPPIANS 1:3-7



A runner died from the heat that day. It was the 2007 Chicago Marathon, and it was my first race of this length. The gun went off, and group by group, we were sent forward, like waves of infantry storming a beach. In the first few miles, I could already see people slowing to a walk. Curious. Around mile ten, I slowed my pace at the upcoming water station, but no one was there to greet us. And more importantly, there was no water or Gatorade. Just a stack of empty cups. I grabbed a cup, and went on. Maybe there'd be water at the next station.

There wasn't.

No one was running anymore. There was just a mass of people shuffling forward, like the walking dead, and I was one of them.



“Do you want a drink?” a spectator asked. It was a lady, by the side of the road, carrying an armful of Gatorade bottles. I took one from her, thanked her, and took a long swig. It might have been the best Gatorade I’d ever tasted.

Long races like the Chicago Marathon can’t take place without thousands of people providing organization, security, and nourishment for the runners. In a similar way, Paul gave thanks for the Philippian church who provided him with support, as “partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now.” (Phil 3:5)

I’ll never forget the “water angels” who came to our aid that day—a lady handing out Gatorade bottles from her own resources, a dude with a garden hose, filling our empty cups—folks that kept us going when the marathon ran dry.

Is there someone in your life, figuratively dying of thirst? A fellow runner in a bad way? Might you be the answer to an unspoken prayer this day, a “water angel” with a full cup, ready to be shared in kindness and mercy? Lord, guide our footsteps.



DAY 4

ARCENIA MAGEO

READ PHILIPPIANS 1:8-11



One of the greatest challenges that I face is parenting. For some time, my days were filled with changing diapers, conversations about diapers with other moms, and yelling at my husband about running out of diapers, all the while holding a watermelon sized leach to my chest, who, of course, needed a clean diaper.

I had no interest in the life I had somehow gotten myself into and it was killing me. I wanted to divorce my family. I wanted to catapult dirty laundry at every sweet face that told me to, “enjoy it, because it goes by fast.” I read every parenting book, blog, and pamphlet in search of someone, who like me, did not enjoy breastfeeding and baby talk, but had figured it out.

One day, I broke. Amongst the chaos of an eventful bedtime routine, I dropped to the floor and cried out to God for help. I asked God to give me the knowledge to fix my situation and enjoy parenting. I cried and sat, and then I heard, “keep reading.”



In Philippians 1:11, Paul writes to encourage the people of Philippi to press on and grow in knowledge and understanding. Of course, the number one way that one can learn and grow in knowledge is reading the Bible. During times of my parenting frustrations, I sought knowledge from renowned authors, trending moms, and those with PhDs. I failed to rely on scripture. I did not read his words on how my parenting journey was never meant to be done alone. I could not see the fine print that noted true joy can only come from him.

If you struggle with parenting, know that much of the knowledge and understanding that you seek lies within scripture. Know that reading and studying the Bible, roots you in peace and grows your faith, which is needed to make it through parenting woes. When you are at your breaking point or before you reach that point, press forward, grab your bible, and keep reading!

If you are struggling with parenting or if reading the Bible is hard for you, please connect with others. #bettertogether

⁸ God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹ I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. ¹⁰ For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. ¹¹ May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God.



DAY 5

CRAIG KLINE

READ PHILIPPIANS 1:12-18A



In prison, Paul had a lot of time to think about the work that God had done through him – the people he met, the new believers he encouraged, the churches that were planted, and the difficulties that he faced. Away from the action and locked in chains, whispers reached him that others were carrying on his preaching and teaching. Paul knew the motives of some were pure, wanting only to strengthen the churches that God had been building. But he also knew some others were taking advantage of his absence to advance their own agendas. Perhaps they were envious of Paul's success and wanted to show that they could do better if given the chance, or maybe they simply wanted to make a name for themselves, and better their circumstances from the power they thought they could wield over others.

Ambition is not kind to our souls when we let it in. Hell wants to divide the church using jealousy, rivalry, envy, and strife (v. 15). Though heaven wants us to love the church in a wide open space, hell wants our souls to contract around distinctions and positions, and to hunger for the praise of men. Hell would be happy knowing that we are missing what it means to know true love of God and of our brothers and sisters. Hell lies that it can give you something you want, if you just lay aside your humility. It is only too glad when the disappointment eventually sinks its teeth in, and hopes that the bitterness and hurt that follow will wound your soul forever.



Heaven calls us to something much greater. Paul was surely tempted to worry about the preaching of others, and whether his ministry was being taken over by a rival. He even sensed that some wanted to compound his pain in prison by making him anxious over whether or not another was going to be seen as his successor (v. 17).

But Paul's will melted into God's will. He knew that, whether the motives of these men were pure or not, the news about Jesus' death and resurrection was being told, and that God was continuing to build His kingdom. He knew that the church's success did not depend on his jail time. In fact, he realized that even his time in prison was within the providence of God, and saw that his incarceration was even being used by God to spread the news of Jesus to the palace guards. In fact, Paul even saw that his very imprisonment encouraged other believers when they saw that the gospel continued to win hearts even though Paul was behind bars, and that the prison could not stop God's kingdom, and couldn't stop Paul's joy (v. 18).

Paul elsewhere wrote that "love is not jealous" (1 Cor 13:4). We all face temptations to forget the big picture, and to feel the "narrow injury". May the Holy Spirit convict us, and allow us to hate this state of our hearts, and evaporate this work of our Enemy in our soul. Let's fall completely on the grace of God, begging Him to give us new hearts that rejoice with the success of others, that values God's kingdom above our own kingdom, and that allows our love to grow beyond ourselves to His Church, and His heart for His church, over anything else. And in this, we can truly rejoice – because these will last forever.



DAY 6

MICHELLE TYNER

READ PHILIPPIANS 1:18B-26



The weeks leading up to a wedding can be the most stressful time in a woman's life. Some spend months working out in the gym just to fit their elegant gowns. When the ceremony is over, the new couple settles in to the "real work." I wonder what this would look like in reverse. What if we focused on reflecting Christ's relationship with his bride more than the ceremony? Don't get me wrong, I love weddings as much as the next person, but not more than their overall purpose. It has been said that a woman glows when she's in love. As the bride of Christ, we have an eternal glow that illuminates in this sinful world. The struggles we face, in our attempts to live countercultural, pale in comparison to the peace we'll feel when we meet Christ in the grandest ceremony of them all. It'll all be worth it!

Prayer "Heavenly Father, strengthen us to focus on loving you more than our traditions and preferences. As we love you, we learn to love ourselves, and as we love ourselves we can truly love others. Father, you gave us the greatest example of this by sending your son Jesus Christ to die a death he didn't deserve. May we also be willing to make temporal sacrifices in exchange for eternal significance. All of these things we ask in your son's Holy name, Jesus Christ. Amen."



DAY 7

JONATHAN EGLE

READ PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30



How do you share the gospel with someone? Tell him about their sin and their need for a savior? Help him understand that no one can earn a spot in heaven through good works? Focus on how much God loves him... so much that God sent His Son to die for him? Those are all great answers, and I hope we are having those conversations, because it's "by the blood of the Lamb and our testimony" that Satan is defeated (Rev 12:11).

But this passage lays out a very simple formula, and it's one that can blow your mind:

- Live a worthy (AKA holy) life.
- If the church does that, then it will be unified.
- If the church is unified, then unbelievers will know they are going to hell but that the church is saved!

How awesome is that? If the world sees the communities of Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, riddled with racism and divisions and conflict, but it also sees a harmonious church for all people living as one, the world will understand the gospel without a word being preached.



It sounds easy, but those are some hard things to actually do. Having one purpose means the church exists for the one and only purpose of glorifying God. To read the Word of God and obey it. If we make any of our own desires more important than that, it is an idol and it destroys the church's unity. Then unbelievers will look at us and see a group of people that's just like all the other people in Southwest Michigan. As hard as it will be to do, the outcome is well worth it. Imagine all the people in Southwest Michigan who just don't seem to "get" Christianity suddenly understanding perfectly!

If we're successful, we will be rewarded richly for the efforts. No, not with health and wealth. Verses 29 and 30 tell us that we'll be rewarded with the privilege of suffering. How is that a privilege? Because it's suffering for Christ - an opportunity to glorify God and store up treasures in heaven, where moths and rust and thieves cannot destroy it (Matt 6:19-21).

A unified church, unbelievers understanding the gospel, and God being glorified! It's an amazing opportunity, but it all starts with living in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ. No, you can't earn your salvation, but our behavior still matters. We can achieve big things, and it all starts with our individual walks with the Lord.



DAY 8

JOEL TORRES

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4



What would you say if I asked you, “What brings joy to the Lord?”. Is it when we are like-minded individuals? Is it doing nothing out of selfish ambition? Well, we’re going to unpack this question.

In these verses (Philippians 2:1-4), we see a clear theme. It’s UNITY. There are four words specifically in verse 2 that clearly tell us that this specific scripture is emphasizing UNITY. The words are: “like”, “same”, “one”, and again “one”. Unity is something that God intended for us to partake in and finds joy when we do that amongst each other. But how do we do that? And “if Christ is worth it” why aren’t we doing that? Notice what is says in Matthew 22:37-39. First, Jesus shares with the Pharisees of the law two important commandments. The first is to ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind’, this one being the greatest. And then shares a second and equally important one: ‘love your neighbor as yourself’. Jesus clearly desires for us to have a deep commitment to love one another no matter the personality or physical differences.



Two easy ways to know we are living out this biblical commandment is when we are loving people for who they are, and loving them on the days that are difficult to do so. This level of love is what shows the world that we have been changed by the very love of God. An example of this is married couples. As a married couple you quickly learn about each other's likes, dislikes, and habits. This happens due to the amount of time spent together, getting to know each other. In the same way, we should spend time getting to know the people around us, even more, those in our community. By doing so, we learn to anticipate what the other is thinking and feeling, regardless of the amount of words spoken or whether the person is even in the same room. This level of intimacy cultivates a preference toward one another. If you desire to know another person, you will value them and begin to think about their needs and minister in deference to them.

As Christians we need to be sure that selfish ambition is never our motivation for doing anything. In humility, we need to look for opportunities to serve others and we need to look out for people's interest too. We are to be channels of kingdom blessing to others and are to be available to God to minister to the people around us. In a very real sense, we are the hands and feet that God uses to minister to people. Our focus in life must not be on our own selfish interests, but on the interests of the kingdom. John 13:34 shows again a commandment given to us in regards to the UNITY He desires for us; **“So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other (NLT).”**

The least we can do in life is to spend time getting to know each other and by doing so we are bringing joy to the Lord. Christ came to our imperfect world and gave His life so that we could have the opportunity to be in communion with each other. Is this worth it? It is completely worth it because Christ is worth it!



DAY 9

SUZANNE SIMMONS

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11



There is so much to learn from these few verses, and verse five sets it up for us. Simply put, “You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.” Easy enough, right?

But wait, is it? Is it so easy to do what Jesus did? Think what Jesus thought? Have the same attitude toward being a servant as Jesus did? Give as Jesus gave? Doesn’t seem so simple anymore once you consider what it all means.

In verse six we learn of Jesus’ humility. He is the Almighty, but He gave up all of the privileges He had been given to come walk here on earth as human. Verse 7 shows us exactly how far He went—from equality with God to the title of slave.

Over the next several verses we hear and learn of humility, sacrifice, and what true love really means. In order to understand what all of this means it is important to understand what being a servant actually means.



1. Being a servant means giving up my rights to others: In today's society, whoever has the most money has the most power. Bill Gates, Donald Trump, and Oprah are all people we associate with money and therefore power. It is the opposite in the economy/society of Jesus. In the economy of Jesus the one with the most power is whoever lives for others and not for themselves.
2. Being a servant means becoming less so others can become more: We naturally want to fill our homes with stuff, fill our closets with clothes, our fridges with food, our garages with cars, and our pockets with money. Here comes the but—to be like Jesus we must become servants, allowing others to become more.
3. Consider what Jesus did....He went from heaven to the cross, from robes to rags, from being served to serving, from golden streets to cobblestone, from heaven's chorus to angry mobs, from the throne to a manger, and the ultimate sacrifice, from exalted to executed. Why did He do all of this? He did it out of obedience, love, and humility.
4. Being a servant means being obedient whatever the cost: He humbled Himself. People in that day and age didn't honor the cross like we do today. Crucifixion was the lowest of the low. He was humble and obedient no matter what...including death. Are we willing to do whatever? Whenever? Wherever? For Jesus? Or have we pre determined how God wants us to serve His people with the lives He has blessed us with.
5. Servanthood will be rewarded: Jesus' reward is being exalted (every knee will bow and every tongue confess). Our reward may be here on earth in some ways, but it will definitely be in heaven. Take a look at Prov. 22:4, Matt 23:11, James 4:10 if you need more proof of the promise from God.



6. Being a servant is more about being than it is about doing: Often times we are waiting for an eye opening, life changing event to know where and how God is working, but sometimes it is gradual. Sometimes you aren't the hero, sometimes you are the one in the mud, the one feeling left behind. Serving was never promised to be glamorous.

How do you treat the cashier at the grocery store? How do you treat the bearer of bad news? How do you treat the opponent? Who have you served today? This week? This month?

The example has been set.

The call is clear.

What remains is....

Our Decision. Our Response. Our Commitment.



DAY 10

STEPHANIE KLINE

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:12-18



We feel fire in our bones at times—times when we have vision, a singular focus on Jesus. Excitement. Energy. But often, more familiar, we tire, doubt, and become discouraged. Our vision is clouded. Internal passion is boiled down to making it through the day. Following Jesus by our own power can be hard. So then, how do we shine a light for Christ? A pillar of light to draw the broken-hearted to God? Heck, we might be the broken-hearted. What if it's not dependent on us mustering a certain level of strength or faith? **What if...**

As Jesus always does, He flips this on its head. God Himself gives us the power, the vision, and the desire to follow Him. The author of this letter, Paul, encourages us to obey “God with deep reverence and fear.” As we live for God, the fruit of our salvation is known. But it's NOT about US. “For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him (verse 13).”



People notice the subtle stories of our life—power in weakness, desire to move to Him in the valley, and the words on our tongue (or lack thereof). In a world of crookedness, His light shines. He shines in the darkness—through us.

In our “deep reverence and fear” for God, simply acknowledging ‘I can’t do this, I need You for everything,’ we open ourselves to experience His power. Hold firmly to the Word of Life—the Word of LIFE, through which we receive the gift of life abundant. Desire His light and joy. And you know what? The world will see His light—and they will share in our joy.



DAY 11

AL FONNER

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:19-24



I wonder what it was about Timothy that caused Paul to lavish such praise on him. Was Timothy charming, witty, and good looking? Perhaps he was sincere and honest. It could be that he was pure of heart and noble in spirit. Maybe Timothy was all of these, or none of them. Whatever it was, I think that Paul was much too discerning to have his head turned by such common, worldly attributes. There must have been something more significant about Timothy to cause Paul to brag about him so. Paul spoke of Timothy's "proven character," but what did that mean? Paul goes on to imply that Timothy was like a son working with his father in the gospel; how is this important?

Imagine if Timothy had been two-faced or prone to elevate himself above others, would Paul have given such a glowing report of his young protege? Or, let's say that, instead of submitting himself to Paul's direction and teaching, as a son takes his father's lead, Timothy had decided to serve the gospel in his own way, would Paul have been so rich in praise for Timothy? Of course not. Such an attitude would surely have caused Paul to send Timothy away.



Timothy, whatever we may say about him, must have been a humble man, which says a lot. Peter wrote, in 1 Peter 3:8, “Finally, all of you, be like minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.” James, in verse 4:10 of his letter, tell us, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” Paul wrote, in Ephesians 4:1-2, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you received. Be completely humble and gentle....” Peter again reminds us, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.” (1 Peter 5:6)

When it comes to humility and how much God prizes our humility, one name comes to my mind: Job. “Then the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?’” (Job 1:8) Talk about being someone worth bragging about! If you’ve read the book of Job, you know what happens; and if you haven’t, I encourage you to read it.

Humility is the key, then. Such humility tears down the walls that would divide us in our purpose and opens the way into our heart, allowing our neighbor to perceive our true natures. More importantly, humility before God allows Him to work the fields of our lives, producing a bountiful harvest. Jesus said, “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Matt 23:12). James, in verse 4:10 of his letter, tells us, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” So, be humble and be worth bragging about. Not by human standards, though, but by God’s.



DAY 12

CINDY BENNETT

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:25-30



Dropping kids off at school only to return home with a missed call and new voicemail. “Your daughter forgot her lunch.” Remembering the smile upon her delicate face while making her own lunch (she’s 7 now), I reach for the unicorn lunch tote, adorned with jelly smears, and race back to the school.

Pulling back onto Glenlord Road, I pull over in a vacant lot to write down my thoughts...

- Send group email.
- Encourage Sarah. Haven’t seen her around.
- Check on Rae’s doctor appointment. Hope she’s doing okay.
- Pick up a Carolina Reaper Pepper for allergen testing. Where in the world will I find one?
- Message my girl’s Girl Scout troop to inquire about volunteering. I could do once a month... I think.



Text coming in.

- Stop by bookstore to pay invoice. Ugh.
- Find 2 people to help with event.
- Set aside time tonight to soak in the lesson. If I'm not too tired.
- Staff meeting in an hour.
- Pray for... (Did Dawson grab his football bag?)
- Check on Linda.
- Did I reply to Ann's text?
- We really need a family dinner tonight!

Thoughts fade and I make an impulsive stop to pick up groceries for tonight's meal.

Reading through Philippians 2, I love this.

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him.... Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ... (Phil 2:25-30).



Two key lessons from this text.

Importance of receiving limits

Epaphroditus was a huge help in Paul's life—deeply attentive to his friend's needs. Impressive? Yes but to the point of **grave sickness**. This man almost died due to extreme measures of caring for a friend. Have you ever worked or served to the point of illness?

Epaphroditus had an overwhelming to-do list masked by passion. And it's tricky, right? As a Christ follower, we are called to serve. So many needs swirling around, cares, projects, loved ones to spend time with, be present with and love. Teens to counsel and comfort. Friends to walk with, and more. The hard part is knowing **when** to pull away like Jesus and find rest for our souls.

Importance of giving praise

Paul lavished encouragement and praise for a friend who served him so well. There was no holding back, and then the lesson gets a little deeper. He is all the more eager to send healthy Epaphroditus back to others so they may have joy.



DAY 13

ROMAN SIMMONS

READ PHILIPPIANS 3:1



“Whatever happens, my dear brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. I never get tired of telling you these things, and I do it to safeguard your faith” (NLT).

After doing a little reading and getting context around this passage, from what I understand, it seems likely Paul had taught the Philippians about rejoicing in the past. Despite the struggles both he and the church faced, they were to have joy in God. Paul wanted to remind the Philippians about rejoicing and, the reminder was certainly beneficial for them.

I’m an avid golfer, as some of you know...and have gotten pretty adept at it, but that was through a lot of hard work.

Hours of reading to understand the fundamentals of the golf swing. Watching others whom I felt were great teachers of the game. Emulating some of the moves of great golfers. All to try and figure out this crazy game.



Then comes the practice time—hitting ball after ball, sunup to sundown. Trying to find that right combination of footwork, hand position, and arm swing.

And doing this again...

And again...

And again...

Until my swing felt as natural as breathing. Until those movements were ingrained in muscle memory.

Getting good at anything involved meticulous repetition.

And even then I can still go out...after all of that work to become better...and with a simple misstep in any one of the basic fundamentals that started wayyy back at square one...the entire mechanics of the swing can be off.

I feel like this is what Paul is trying to remind the Philippians.

You have come a long way, you have put in a lot of work, but don't forget what got you here.

GET BACK TO THE BASICS.

REMEMBER YOUR FUNDAMENTALS

Rejoice in God.

And I'm sure that will be the first step in getting YOUR swing "back on track".



DAY 14

DENNIS VARO

READ PHILIPPIANS 3:2-11



God is a transformer.

We go through our lives and it's so easy to get caught up in the world and its mess, especially when it comes to being accepted by our peers or those around us that we seem to feel the need to impress. We can get full of ourselves and begin to feel a little more important than we should. Prideful maybe?

Many years ago, I was very new at “worship leading” in another church, and coming from the very secular music industry, I was able to really show my skills as a music leader, singer, and musician. Every Sunday people, sometimes more than a few, would come after service and compliment me on my voice or something. It made me feel good, and yes, proud. And I thought I was doing a great job.



One particular Sunday of really high energy music and “singing my lungs out,” I was approached by someone from the congregation who was visiting. Expecting the normal, “Man, you sure were awesome up there” or, “What a voice!,” this gentleman came up to me and said, “You’re a very talented vocalist and I can tell you are experienced and love what you do. But I was wondering if you were worshipping, or were you just a really good entertainer?”

Wow! I was totally unprepared for that!

That was a humbling experience, but it taught me that my need to be accepted for my talent was not what God wanted for me or for worship. That moment started to transform me. With the help of my Pastor, (who knew this time was coming) started helping me understand that pride doesn’t serve God, while being proud to be a servant of His Kingdom is life changing.

Heavenly Father,

You are my transformer. Thank you for your patience with me as I work through the things you have in store for me. Keep self pride away and may the pride I have in You grow and become obvious to those around me.

In Jesus name,

Amen



DAY 15

KATHY CRAIG

READ PHILIPPIANS 3:12-16



I hold the camera still, elbows positioned tight against my frame. Focus. Breathe in, hold. My finger cautiously fiddles for the shutter, as passion yearns to stop the world, just to be able to stare into this time-sensitive experience a bit longer. I want to pause, lured into the complacency of a mountain-top moment that I really don't want to leave.

But all our lenses change throughout life, and the walk varies from steady to stroll, then scurry to sprint, to steady again, without clear sight to the finish line. You have to keep going. Movement is a requirement on this Jesus-journey.

I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I **press on** ... (Philippians 3:12b)

PRESS. ON. Those two small words feel
tiresom
taxing
exhausting.



Didn't Jesus promise rest for the weary? Life can be so laborious in a sin-fallen world.

Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, **I press on** (Philippians 3:13b-14a)

Time has actually taught me to believe in the tired, atrophied seasons; years when dreams waned, efforts reaped anorexic fruit instead of an anticipated harvest, and desires to understand 'why' went unexplained. Days when my head-desire to run was only a hairline less firm than my heart-logical obedience to **press on**, though I didn't like it, I did.

I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.... (Philippians 3:14)

I learned this: When I choose to **press on** regardless of circumstances, the **Holy Spirit presses** in. Now here's something interesting...

Did you know that in ancient Israel before Christ came, one of the laws demanded that Jewish men were required to wear tassels known as "tzitzit"? It's recorded in Numbers 15:38. God told Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel.'" But why? That makes no sense to us. In the ancient world though, the hem and tassels on a person's clothing symbolized the owner's authority and identity. Legal contracts were actually 'signed' on clay tablets by pressing the corner of the hem with the tassel into the clay.



So consider this. As you choose to press on, **God presses in**, embedding His identity and authority deeper into your heart, mind, and soul, transforming you. Now picture what God's tzitzit—the power of His hem—can do in your life. His Word declares that the train of His robe fills the temple with glory...and even the hem of Jesus' earthly garment healed a woman.

Press on. What might His hem do in your life as you press on, and the Holy Spirit presses in?

What if mountain-top moments remained evident in your life, even in the valleys?

But we must hold on to the progress we have already made. (Philippians 3:16)



DAY 16

ANDREW ROBINSON

READ PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1



One of the most enduring issues that believers face is fear. Fear of the future, fear of circumstances, and fear of what others may think paralyze Christians and make them doubt God. Once fear hits, worry and anxiety take over, and once worry and anxiety consume us, stress and other health-related issues manifest. Yes, we read verses like Matthew 5:33-34, “Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. So don’t worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today’s trouble is enough for today” (NLT) and the Apostle Paul’s statement to Timothy recorded in 2 Timothy 1:7, “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” But, we lose touch with these verses when the weight of fear and anxiety overcome us.

So, how do we overcome fear and live life unafraid? Well, in Matthew 14:22-36, the writer recounts a boat outing where the disciples witness Jesus walking on water. During this miraculous occasion, Peter asked Jesus to approach Him, and the Messiah responded, “Come.” The walk to Jesus was a clear example of two perplexing and contradictory responses. Whenever Peter looked down at his environment, situation, or circumstance (in this case the water), he sunk. Yet, whenever he looked to Jesus, he walked on top of his circumstance and situation. Whenever we look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, we can live life unafraid.



DAY 17

LIBBY EGLE

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:2-7



In the middle of this passage, between conflict among fellow Christian workers and worry, Paul, the writer of Philippians, from prison, writes: Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—

Rejoice!

I do not know what you are facing today, but whatever you are up against, whether it is conflict with others, or an internal struggle filled with worries, pause for a moment. Take your heart and your mind off the struggles at hand and look up. Take a deep breath. If you are a follower of Jesus, you always have something you can rejoice in. We are in Christ, holy and blameless in God's sight. Children of the King. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the guarantee of our salvation, that someday we will be together with God, with new bodies, in a perfect place, for eternity.



As we rejoice in our salvation, Paul encourages us to be considerate of those around us, not beating them with the truth of the Gospel, but humbly, joyfully presenting them with the Good News—salvation is available to all! Remembering that the time and day of Jesus' return is unknown, but could happen at any moment.

What do we do with the worries that remain? Turn those worries into prayers to God, tell Him what you need. Then stop. And **thank God** for all He has done. And He will fill us with His peace. The Life Application Study Bible puts it this way: "True peace is not found in positive thinking, in absence of conflict, or in good feelings. It comes from knowing that God is in control. Our citizenship in Christ's kingdom is sure, our destiny is set, and we can have victory over sin."



DAY 18

ANN BRAINARD

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:8-9



I leaned over the side deck, harnessed in on the 10PM–2AM watch and anticipated my shift ending soon. Round the clock, one of us, captain and three crew, were assigned to skipper duty—four hours on, six hours off. Destination—Key Largo. Both sails were taut; this was the fourth night of continuous sailing under a gibbous moon; the winds were rising to 30 knots. White caps began topping the 7-foot rolling waves. I cranked the winch to reef in the jib sail that helped level the 38-foot Beneteau. Her motor purred below, assisting the power of the sails. A flapping sound on the floor startled me. I groped below my knees expecting my tube of chapstick, and proceeded to excite a flying fish that had propelled itself into our cockpit. Eeek! I locked the wheel and left to wake Bob to start his next shift. Arrrgh, he could deal with the fish. Note: here's where I lost control of my thoughts. In the bunk below deck, the screaming of the wind and pounding waves were magnified ten fold. The thin mattress beneath me would rise and slam down so violently that I could hear fiberglass cracking. Dishes and stored equipment rolled and pounded with each rise and fall. I wrapped a pillow around my ears to cushion my head, but the brutal boat movements threw my body from one side to the other. I began praying...



Stop and think about Philippians 4:8-9. What Godly thoughts! Do you see how they are attributes of God Almighty Himself? He wants all that is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy, to shape our thinking in ALL circumstances.

True—God’s Truth revealed in His Word, man, the church, the world.

Noble—honorable, majestic, whatever evokes respect.

Right—divine standards of right and wrong, ultimate righteousness.

Pure—chaste, innocent, or morally upright—probably includes purity of thought, deed and words, as well as sexual purity.

Lovely—evokes love and admiration and is pleasing to the heart with righteousness.

Admirable—deeds and thoughts that move people to praise.

Excellent—doing all within our power and with His grace to pursue and produce the very best.

Praiseworthy—conduct that wins the affection and admiration of others.

Let’s cast a bigger net with our minds—How majestic are God’s creations, the mountains, oceans, wildlife, your heartbeat, and more!

But if we sift through our sea of thoughts today...from our phone, social media, TV shows, billboards, job...what then? Do we shun popular media? This scripture points to thinking beyond what we see and hear so that we might contemplate and sift what God wants us to value.

Life gets in the way. “I can’t be always be thinking of those 8 virtues! Sometimes crap happens!” How do we see the truth, the noble, and the right when devastating circumstances hold us in their grip?



We move to Philippians 4:9, the ACTION step—“What ever you have learned or received from me, or heard or seen in me, PUT IT INTO PRACTICE.” This is the walk-it-out command! God calls us to do this in ALL ways, in gentle winds AND in hurricanes. Notice Paul did not say do it once. He said “practice”, make it a habit! Why not acquire a taste for Godly thinking?

What happened that night three miles offshore in the ocean? I thanked God for my life. I told Him I’d had a good life so far. I assured Him I was ready to join Him. But I didn’t want to. I asked Him if I could just see my daughter one more time. I prayed for safety, and reminded Him of a squall situation years ago. “Even the winds and the waves obey You!” Our boat’s motor failed at 2:30AM; we waited another three hours under sail, waiting for the tow boat to guide us in through the reefs as the seas were too violent to safely tow us. The boat arrived at the harbor at 6AM. All crew eagerly stumbled to the showers. The dock boards and walls kept moving in the rhythm of the sea. We were safe! God was with us. He was, is, and will be!

Questions for you to have a slow conversation with your Creator.

- How has my thought life been this week?
- Do I need to confess ungodly thoughts?
- What situations cause me to stray away from this perspective of thinking aligned with these 8 virtues?
- Do these 8 words awaken life and joy in me, or do I feel rebellious and angry at the thought of how they might govern my life?
- Am I willing to let go of the dark stuff in my worldly net of thoughts? What will I let go of? How and when will I practice?



DAY 19

JORDAN DRYER

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:10-14



“Everything is meaningless,” says the Teacher, “completely meaningless!”
(Ecclesiastes 1:2)

If this world and this one life is all each of us can trust in, there is certainly no reason to be content.

Surely the hedonist will come to the end of the race disappointed. Not only the one who chases pleasure in life, but anyone who avoids putting Jesus in His rightful place as the top priority in every aspect of life will arrive, to some degree, at the same destination.

Suppose for a couple moments what the following would mean to you: the perfect family, house, looks, the best vacation, the perfect job with the perfect retirement plan. Now, how important will each of those listed above be to you in 200 years? Meaningless.



The majority of us, in my estimation suffer from severe spiritual shortsightedness. We trade the great for the okay, the eternal for the immediate, or in Esau's case, inheritance for a knob of bread and a bit of stew (Genesis 25). If accomplishing our goals is meaningless, what actually will have meaning? Where should we put our treasure?

We, as disciples of Jesus, must put our treasure, our hope, and trust in the work He has already done.

It seems easy to get stuck in a shortsighted mindset. But we know the end of the story! The struggles we individually and corporately face here are not even worth comparing to the glory that will come (Romans 8). If you have access to enough food, clothing, and shelter you ought to be content (1 Timothy 6) and with the excess, be shockingly generous. We can be content because we know our inheritance (Hebrews 13:14).

I hope my words do not convey that I have it all together, though I'm learning how to follow Jesus better with those around me (Philippians 3:12) by finding contentment sharing the struggles and joining in the praise.

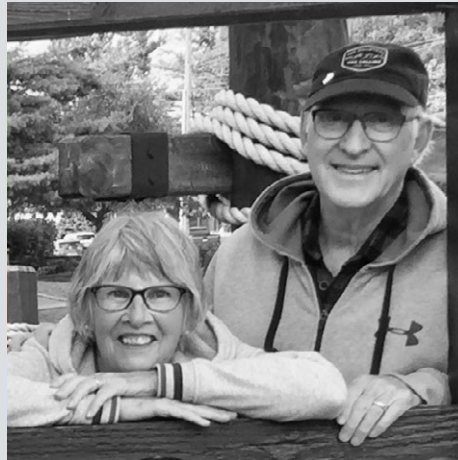
Philippians 4:10-14 "How I praise the Lord that you are concerned about me again. I know you have always been concerned for me, but you didn't have the chance to help me. Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength. Even so, you have done well to share with me in my present difficulty."



DAY 20

AL AND SUE LUTZ

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:15-20



In the closing verses in Philippians 4, Paul recognized and thanked the church for their generosity.

From the verses in 2 Corinthians 8:1-2 (NLT) “Now I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his kindness has done through the churches in Macedonia. They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity.”

We see that the churches in Macedonia (modern day Greece) were very poor, as was the Philippian church. In spite of their poverty, they supported Paul with open hearts and honored God.

The Philippian church was very grateful that Paul was the leader in establishing their church. They truly heard the Gospel and acted out of their hearts when they provided support while he was in Philippi and when he left.



Paul recognized this church was one of the only churches that supported him. When he stated that other churches did not provide support he did this without any judgment, just a statement of fact. Good advice for all of us.

Paul certainly did not set up the church for any type of personal gain, only to spread the Good News. As a result, the fruits of his labor came in the form of giving by the Philippian church.

Paul was humble enough to accept the gift and prayed that God would in return bless the givers.

Luke 6: 38 (NLT) “Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full - pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back.”

As we travel through our spiritual journey, we would be wise to focus on the message that Paul has given to us in these verses. Receive the word of God into our hearts first, and then let our hearts show the generosity needed to provide help to the church and to others.

Reach out today and bless someone and watch God bless You!



DAY 21

BRIAN BENNETT

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:21-23



Grace may be one of the most misunderstood and overused words in our Christian circles. For some, grace is something they say to give thanks before eating, for others it was the moment of their conversion, and others something they associate with the song “Amazing Grace”. Grace is central to our faith and understanding of the Gospel (the Good News of Jesus). During this 21-day devotional journey we have walked through the book of Philippians and Paul, the writer, opens (Philippians 1:2) and closes appealing to God’s grace (Philippians 4:21-23). It is important to remember that Paul was writing this letter from prison and during a time when he and the people he was writing to were experiencing the struggle of their duties, a dangerous environment, divisions in the church, delays in answered prayer, and distance between them. Their journey was one that was filled with suffering, but they were overflowing with joy because of God’s grace!



The definition of grace that has often been given is, “unmerited favor” and that it is best exemplified in what Jesus did for us on the cross. This is true, but grace is also meant to empower us to live in God’s “unmerited favor”. When we are filled with grace we are able to encounter challenges, and stretching circumstances, and respond like Jesus. Philip Yancey in his bestselling book *Amazing Grace* never defines grace. Instead he says, “In sum, I would far rather convey grace than explain it.” Grace is meant to be lived and to overflow in and through us.

The final verses of Philippians say, “Give my greetings to each of God’s holy people—all who belong to Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send you their greetings. And all the rest of God’s people send you greetings, too, especially those in Caesar’s household. 23 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (Philippians 4:21-23). Paul greets God’s people and acknowledges those who belong to Christ Jesus. This is a great reminder that there is a special grace given, through Jesus, to His people, that we are also to extend to one another. Greetings in first century Jewish culture were filled with love and generous hospitality. As we have stretched for more of God’s presence and plan these past few weeks I pray that we are beginning to overflow with a greater grace (unmerited favor) toward those surrounding us.

Grace is not bound by our circumstances. Grace overflows boundaries. Paul was in prison, and mentions in verse 22, “those in Caesar’s household.” God used Paul’s house arrest for His good and some of Caesar’s evil empire had become Christians! God always bends all things for our good (Romans 8:28). One commentator plainly states, “Caesar’s household...that Citadel of Satan became a center for the Gospel” (*Opening Up Philippians*). No matter how hard our life is, or lost our community seems, God’s grace is able to overflow boundaries. How does God do it? He fills His people with His grace so we can be poured out to others. May God’s presence and plan continue to unfold as you move forward stretching for more of Him and may His grace overflow through you. You are deeply loved by God and your church family.

