

September 13, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Starting and Ending Well

Philippians 1:1 – 6

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. **And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.***

Pastor Craig gave us an excellent beginning in Philippians and we will try to keep that excellence all the way through as we move through this book, because good beginnings deserve good endings. I love to read and I have read many books that began spectacularly – and ended with a thud. **I believe that one of the major themes of this letter is that starting and ending well is the mark of those who are Christ's**, and that it does not matter if you start well if your ending is bad. I don't think it is too much to say that those who do not endure to the end will not be among the saved. Jesus said as much in Matthew 24:13: *'But the one who endures to the end, it is he that shall be saved.'* That is the message I left with you before we took off for Kenya in August and that is the word that has been in my heart these past weeks as well.

The Greeks, well known for their competitive spirit, invented the art of competitive running. There were many races that were run during the course of their frequent Olympic competitions. We are familiar with the marathon and high hurdles as well as the myriad of short course races they also ran. But there was one race which held periodically outside of the Olympic competition that was as highly regarded perhaps even more so than all the other competitive races. This race was called the torch relay. The race which spawned the modern day Olympic torch race and ceremony, often took place in the streets and alleys of Athens. Ten or twelve men would assemble before the city fathers, each carrying a torch, and then, one by one, each torch was lit from the same flame. On their marks, the runners were sent out as a group and guided along a course that had been laid out among the city streets on which obstacles and barriers had been placed. The object of the race was to cross the finish line with your torch still lit. You could not stop and put the torch down or prop it anywhere. You had to hold it high and run with as much integrity as possible. In this race the victory seldom went to the fastest or the strongest. This was a race that depended upon timing and rhythm. To keep that torch lit required the ability to hold it properly, shielded from objects along the route and held away from the wind. If you ran too fast, you might put out the flame. If you ran too slow, the torch might burn up completely before you reached the finish line. If a runner's torch flamed out, there was no relighting it. He was forced to drop out. The winner of the race was the first man to cross the finish line with his torch still lit. The burning question is, will your torch still be lit at the finish?

When I say that starting and ending well is the mark of those who belong to Christ, I am assuming two things. First that **our beginning in the faith is God-initiated**. That is, our beginning is all of Christ. Paul says, ***And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you...'*** If we have come to Christ, we must not think that it was by the sole effort of our will to do so. The Bible clearly indicates that it is He who begins the work in us. We learned in Ephesians that prior to God's call, we were dead in our sins and trespasses, morally unable to respond to God, much less love Him. Our hardness and rebellion against God was total, everything we did in this rebellion was sin, our inability to submit to God or reform ourselves was total, and we were therefore totally deserving of eternal punishment. That is what is known in doctrinal lingo as Total Depravity – not that we are as bad as we could be, but that apart from the grace of God that calls sinners to repentance, there is no delight in the holiness of God, there is no glad submission to the sovereign authority of God, and there is no movement within our souls toward God. As Romans tells us: ***None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.*** Romans 3:10-11 So if there is to be any movement in our hearts toward Christ – it must be God-initiated.

I would say that there are many who profess Christ who have never had a good beginning in Christ. **That is, the faith they say they have is self-generated and not God-initiated**. Paul says much the same thing in chapter 3: ***Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.***

Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. Philippians 3:17-19 Paul was evidently talking about those in the Christian community who professed a saving faith but in reality they were enemies of the cross. They were consumed with taking care of their physical appetites with little consideration of heavenly things. I think they were professing Christians who allowed their liberty in Christ to degenerate into fleshly license. They literally worshipped their appetites [**whatever we give ourselves to is effectively our god**] glorying in their so-called 'freedom' in Christ, which actually was a shame.

The fact that they are characterized as 'enemies of the cross' means that instead of denying themselves they pampered themselves. They were devoid of that sense of self-denial that marks true Christians. Instead of walking the narrow road of humility, they strode the broad highway of pride. They probably had all the right forms of worship and talked about God as though they knew Him but their faith was hollow. They were focused on the here and now instead of on heaven: *with minds set on earthly things.* They were materialistic, self-indulgent, and earthly-minded. **That Christ had never begun a good work in them is clear from the sentence passed on them by Paul: *Their end is destruction.*** Those who belong to Christ will never share this end. What this means is that Christ had never begun a work in them.

And the stunning fact is that there were '**many**' who were actually enemies of the cross. I am reminded of our Lord's words in the gospel of Matthew: *Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.* Matthew 7:13-14 Evidently there are many who pose as Christians, may even think that they **are** Christians, only to find out in the end they are not. Instead they are actually opposing the message of the cross, which invites us to come and die with Christ. To die to our will and embrace Christ's will – to die to our way and take His way – to die to all that the world holds dear in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ.

In the gospel of Luke, these enemies of the cross are pictured this way: *And someone said to him, Lord, will those who are saved be few? And he said to them, Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, open to us, then he will answer you, I do not know where you come from. Then you will begin to say, We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets. But he will say, I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!* Luke 13:23-27 It is not enough to merely have heard the words of Christ or to have a loose association with Him or His followers – going to church and listening to a sermon – or simply attending at Christmas and Easter will not save you. **What saves you is the work of Christ by His Holy Spirit in your heart when you respond to His word of grace with God-initiated faith.**

The second thing I am assuming here is that **our ending in the faith is God-sustained.** *And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* Apart from the grace of God, none of us is assured of enduring all the way to the end. This is why Paul reminds his readers in nearly every letter of the grace of God. Romans, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, it is always: **'Grace to you.'** Grace is the power of God to do in us what we could never do. Apart from His grace I have no confidence that I will wake up tomorrow still in the faith. Apart from his sustaining grace, from start to finish, none of us is assured that we will persevere to the end. But the good news about the gospel of Jesus Christ is that if we begin by the gospel of grace – if Christ begins that good work in us to believe – **He will finish what He started.** *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...'* Hebrews 12:2

Paul says this to the Corinthians: *Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.* 1 Corinthians 15:1-2 We receive the gospel, we stand in the gospel and we are saved by the gospel – and the proof of that is that we endure and remain in the gospel – that is we hold fast the gospel. The word translated **hold fast** has the meaning of possessing or occupying. **To hold fast the word means that we have appropriated the gospel in our lives** – that is we have made the gospel part of who we are – we don't just have some intellectual understanding of the gospel. To **hold fast** also had the nautical meaning of steering a ship to land. And Paul is saying that the proof that we have indeed believed the gospel is that we finally steer this ship to land.

The other possibility is that we have believed in vain. Paul said: '*...unless you believed in vain...*'. That is the gospel has not penetrated our hearts to birth new life within and we have merely accepted the gospel as good advice. John said this about those who believe in vain: *They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.* 1 John 2:19

The Scripture is replete with warnings that the reality of our faith is proved not just by good beginnings, but by good endings: *But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.* Hebrews 3:13 **And my contention this morning is that good endings are only made possible by good beginnings.** That is, we have really embraced the gospel of grace and it daily impacts our lives, from the moment of new birth until we go to be with the Lord, or He returns to gather His church at the end of the age. Because it is God who initiates faith and it is God who sustains faith all the way through so that Paul could say with boldness: ***And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*** When Christ does a thing, the end is never in doubt.

I have always been sobered by one passage in the Bible whenever I read it. It is in 2 Timothy, written by Paul near the end of his life and it concerns a fellow worker, Demas. Paul tells Timothy: *For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.* 2 Timothy 4:10 Nothing more is said. We don't know anything beyond the bare bones of the statement Paul makes that *Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.* What I read here is the heartbreak of a man whose friend apparently did not hold fast the gospel to the end. And I read in that little reference at the very least a warning never to coast.

Demas seemed to begin well. Four or five years earlier, during another imprisonment, Paul refers to Demas as a fellow worker in the gospel in both the letter to the Colossians and to Philemon. He is listed among those Paul considered fellow soldiers in the fight of faith. But now Demas is gone – and not just gone, but he deserted Paul, left him in the lurch. Paul is in prison yet again and Demas, instead of being a faithful encouragement in Paul's imprisonment, left him there, with only Luke to befriend him. Maybe Demas feared for his life – maybe the thought of imprisonment scared him off. We don't really know except that Paul says that he was *in love with this present world.* That may mean that Demas found the going tough and was seduced by the temptation of a more comfortable life and did not count it a joy to suffer for the gospel and choose to be *'...mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.'* Hebrews 11:25

But in the very next verse we hear a voice of hope: *Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.* 2 Timothy 4:11 You remember Mark. He was the cousin to Barnabas who went with Paul on his first evangelistic crusade and the Bible records that he deserted the team in Pamphilia and went home to Jerusalem. Again, we have no idea why Mark deserted but we do know that when he wanted to go on the next trip, the issue of his desertion became a bone of contention between Paul and Barnabas and they split over it. So evidently his desertion was, at least in Paul's eyes, not a good thing. But here is Mark, at the end of Paul's life, reconciled, involved in ministry, and useful to the Lord and to Paul. Mark started well, stumbled early on – but the One who had begun a good work in Him was faithful to bring him through in the end.

We do not know the end of either Mark or Demas' stories. We never find out if Demas ever repented of his wandering away from the faith and was finally reconciled. I hope with all my heart that is so. But what these two stories serve to do is provide both a word of warning and a word of hope. We need to feel the impact of the warning that just because someone seems to appear to start well does not mean they will finish well – if their beginning is not founded in the grace of God; and that just because someone stumbles at the gate does not mean that they won't get back up and run with endurance – if it is Christ who began the work.

And over all of this flies this banner: **And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.** Have you made a good beginning in Christ? Is it Christ who has begun the good work in you? Is it Christ to whom you have committed your life? If so – be assured that He will bring you all the way through. As Paul says in Romans 8: *For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 8:38-39

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

Thank you for good beginnings in Christ and the assurance that once that good work is begun You promise to bring us all the way to glory. Grant us the perseverance and strength to embrace the cross for the joy set before us and run with endurance the race set before us. Don't let us drift – don't allow us to coast – don't let the temptations of this present world seduce us away from the everlasting pleasure of knowing You. May we not be counted among those who have believed in vain, but rather among those who know the power of the gospel in our lives. For those who do not have the assurance that You have begun that good work in them I pray that today would be the day of their salvation. You have the power to break through sin-hardened hearts and overcome all resistance to Your grace. Fill our souls with the delight of knowing You and spreading Your joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.