

3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 Every time I pray for all of you, I always pray with joy, 5 because of your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 I am convinced of this very thing: that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. 7 I am equally convinced that it is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I have you in my heart, for both in my chains and in my defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all share in this grace with me. 8 Yes, God is my witness of how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

9 And I pray that your love may still increase more and more in knowledge and every insight. 10 This will result in your approval of the things that really matter, so that you will be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

### God's Work

I finally finished a project I started over a year ago. Over a year ago we took out the old fireplace and put in a pellet stove. In doing so we removed the wall, framed up a new one, dry walled, tiled, and put in a pellet stove. It worked. It worked great. In fact last year we didn't fire up the furnace during the winter months. We ran the pellet stove. It created an atmosphere of heat and joy. But it wasn't finished until last week because it worked and I'm not great at finishing projects. I don't like painting. A wall plate needed to be installed. The tile still had to be glued to the wall. The wall needed to be primed and painted. It was something that I was supposed to do during the summer months when the pellet stove wasn't in use and hot. That project is finished though there is more that I could do.

Do you ever feel bogged down and burdened with so much to do that you just don't know where to begin? I do. This time of year more than ever, we have so much to do and with all of the extra work it only reveals our faults and failings in life. I like to believe I've got my life in order. I don't fall into sin. I'm not depressed, upset, or frustrated but that would be a lie. I'm like another unfinished project with a lot of work still needing to be done.

But Paul rejoices, rather than focus on the unfinished work, he rejoices that God is bringing it to completion. The God that begins, sustains, and completes projects is Jesus. What is this work begun in you? It's not some pellet stove or even a bit of painting. This is something that God does for us, begins in us. It's faith, the gift of God. This work is God's work.

God was at work in and for his apostle. During his 2nd missionary journey Paul passed over to Macedonia. There he went to a Roman colony called Philippi. There was no synagogue there, which means they didn't even have ten Jews. So he went down to the river and found a quiet place to pray and there he met Lydia. *The Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying* (Acts 16:14). Later Paul drove out a demon from a little girl and everything fell apart. They were charged with being Jewish and "*advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.*" They were *stripped of their clothes, beaten with rods, severely flogged, thrown in jail, and put in the stocks.* (Acts 16:22, 23). There they sat singing hymns and praying to God when an earthquake freed them. It was certainly an eventful mission trip and yet God was at work even in the stress, burdens, and beatings of life.

It was a difficult church plant but Paul really didn't do much in Philippi. He presented the Word of God. God made it grow. He then moved on and God worked through the Philippians for his apostle. They remained in contact, supporting and encouraging the apostle wherever he went. Paul's not upset with them like he was with the Galatians. There was no major false-teaching that needed correction like among the Corinthians. There isn't even a mention of sin. The tone is different and he speaks joy. You think a public beating would take that away but not at all. Paul is thankful and joyous because of the fellowship, the partnership, the unity that they had together. God through the gospel had brought them together.

Paul thanks God for the Philippians. Paul lifts before God his brothers and gives thanks to God for their goodness, their love, their joy, their generosity but most importantly the fellowship they have.

Just as God was at work in Philippi God is also at work with us. But it doesn't always feel that way. Sometimes it doesn't even look like it, especially during the holidays when we are more stressed out than ever. Patience is at an all-time low, and we snap so easily. Here we are in a joyous season and joy seems in short supply. Maybe you feel like an unfinished project. Maybe you feel like God started you down the right track but somewhere along the line we fell off. We still struggle with sin. Life doesn't feel as joyous as Paul's letter to Philippi. Our feelings for one another are lacking and we're getting closer to Christmas. If you're anything like me, then your focus is in the wrong spot.

I like to focus on work, and what I can do. I like to look back at completed projects and get that feeling of accomplishment. Our natural opinion of the law is that we get what we deserve. If you want to feel accomplished then you have to work. But the natural opinion of God's law is that we need to do something to contribute to our salvation. There is something you must do in order to earn God's favor and be at peace. But not everyone agrees on how much work you need to do before you are complete. Some ascribe all the work of conversion to the individual, just present the facts of Christianity and other philosophies of this world and after careful research and comparison they'll come to the right conclusion. It's up to you... and that's the Pelagian error which says that a person can be saved without the Spirit, and can turn towards God, believe the gospel and merit forgiveness of sins.

Others focus a little less on their works. They'll argue that a person can turn toward God and begin conversion but they can't complete it without the Holy Spirit. The Semi-Pelagians are a little closer. Then there are the Synergists which say we must work together with God. But Paul says, "*We were dead in our transgressions and sin when God made us alive in Christ.*" Paul says, "*That he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 1:6). Paul ascribes all work, all glory, all responsibility for conversion to God. It's his work. It's what he does. He makes the unwilling, willing. He takes stubborn lifeless hearts of stone and gives us hearts of flesh.

There isn't anything we can do. That's what the Gospel tells us. And that is more offensive than the Law. It's humbling because it tells us that you couldn't do anything... so God did it for you. You are purely passive, simply receiving God's gifts. And after the Holy Spirit has worked through Word and Sacrament giving us a will to want and do the things of God we can rejoice. God alone saves. God alone brings us to faith. God alone keeps us in the faith and brings us to glory on the last day. Paul puts all glory on Jesus and sets him at the center and makes us realize we can do nothing.

Christianity isn't about our doing. It's God's Work from beginning to end. For that we could be more thankful. We can call out the good and beautiful for what it is. Give thanks to God for your church, your brothers and sisters in Christ. We share together a common faith, a bond so unique that it brings together people of every nation, culture, tribe, and language. We are united with those around the world. We're not alone.

God did this. His love accomplished it. *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son.* It was God's love that Jesus came among us. It was God's love that Jesus came in poverty. In his word he tells us how he faithfully lived for you. Jesus was at work for you throughout his life, death, and resurrection. There on the cross he called out, "it is finished." Your salvation is complete, your justification is finished, but we will continue to grow in this until the day of completion. This same God who works for you is also at work in you. That is where he placed his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit also known as the sanctifier works in us to be more and more like Jesus. God is at work for you, he has placed his Spirit in you, and he is at work through you.

God was at work through the Philippians and this crept into Paul's prayers and praise. Paul gives thanks for God in every remembrance of them. Paul isn't trying to butter them up, he sincerely misses them. That's why he's writing to them. Not only that but when they found out Paul was under house arrest in Rome, they sent Epaphroditus with an offering and in order to help him. They shared with the apostle in all things, even when he was alone, isolated, and locked up. They were sharers not only in his imprisonment but also in the defense and

confirmation of the Gospel. Paul thanks them. He informs them of his present situation. He prays that they would continue to grow in knowledge so that they may be pure and blameless in the day of Christ.

Paul's prayer is also my own for you. Because we aren't done growing in grace until the day we die. My justification is complete but sanctification, my being made more like Jesus is behind schedule. But when we keep the focus on God we realize that he started it and he promises he will finish it. Until that time I can go back to his work for us, in us, and through us.

Our worship reflects this theology. Some churches see Sunday morning as a day to get pumped up and show God how worthy you are of salvation. Our worship is designed to show us how unworthy we are but God has done something about that. Still more see worship as something we do for God but the divine service is ultimately something God does for us, as he humbles and heals. This is seen in our worship facilities as we look up front and see the baptismal font, where God washes us and pours out his Spirit on us, for the forgiveness of sins. The pulpit and lecturn remind us that God sends his Spirit through his life giving Word. Then here on the altar Christ comes again to bring you his life giving body and blood. Our worship service is not intended to entertain but to present and saturate you with the Word. Because "*Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*"

In the Word of Christ we are filled with the Spirit. Not because of what we've done but because of Jesus. We are filled with his righteousness and we can live for him. We can live less focused on ourselves and give thanks to God for those placed in our lives. I thank God for you. I thank God for our synod for our brothers and sisters in the faith. Emotion drives the apostle's prayer. He isn't exactly stone faced and stoic. He isn't as reserved as I am but Paul was still a work in progress at the time of writing.

Just like so many other projects still to be done this time of year. The holidays may be stressful they're not about us, our work. It's God's Work and he will finish what he's started on his own schedule. It took me almost a year to do some simple painting. God on the other hand has his hands full for us, in us, and through us. Paul promises that what God began he will complete on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it doesn't matter how incomplete you feel he will do it because it's God's Work. Amen.