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THE SEE SERIES

# PHILIPPIANS

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A DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY

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CHRIS TIEGREEN

See your  
life with  
new eyes



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*Philippians: A Devotional Commentary: See Your Life with New Eyes*

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# The See Series

Human beings live by vision. We're directed by the images in our minds. We pursue goals when we can *see* them; we grow according to examples we've observed more than the knowledge we've learned; and we embrace hope, despair, and numerous other perspectives based on what we see happening around us. Even people who don't think of themselves as visionary tend to have some mental picture of where they are headed and why. It's the way we're wired.

Most of us have a big vision—a sense of ultimate meaning and destiny, or even just a dream or a goal for our lives. We want to live with purpose. We orient our lives by what we can picture.

We also have smaller visions—what's on the agenda for today, this week, this year, or even the next couple of decades—that shape our short-term decisions.

If our little visions and big vision don't align with each other, we feel frustrated and compromised, as if our lives are going nowhere and our desires may

never be fulfilled. But if we can align these visions and see clearly, we grow steadily, even dramatically, into our purpose and calling.

## SEE, BE, LIVE

Christian teaching hasn't always recognized our visionary nature. Much instruction over the years has been based on a know-it-then-do-it approach to Scripture—as if life change were simply a matter of learning the truth and then applying it. But such an approach bypasses heart transformation and can easily become legalistic and frustrating.

Though knowing and doing are both very important, following Jesus is more than a matter of knowledge and willpower. We can never *will* ourselves to be who we need to be. We are not called simply to *do*; we are called to *be*. When we put knowing and doing before being, we end up in the same condition that many of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time found themselves in—as pious people aiming to live godly lives without the necessary inner transformation.

Let me explain what I mean by *knowing*—an unfortunately imprecise word in English. We might read the Bible and *know* the commandments, instructions, encouragement, and truth it conveys. We receive that information and even agree with it. And if we want to be obedient, we will act on what we know. In that sense, our approach is both cognitive and behavioral—our thoughts affect our actions. But knowledge alone won't change our hearts, motives, desires, impulses, and everything else in us that needs to be transformed.

We see this phenomenon in the multitudes of people who memorize Jesus' words about faith but still lie awake all night with worry; who love Psalm 23 but still believe they are pursued by misfortune, not goodness and mercy; who agree that Jesus is Lord but don't live as though he is. Knowledge and action alone aren't comprehensive and compelling enough to reshape us.

In addition to our intellectual or informational knowledge, we also live from a particular worldview that shapes everything about us. This, too, is *knowing*, but it's a radically different kind of knowledge, isn't it? It's how we see the world, which is why I prefer words such as *seeing* and *vision* to capture it. This kind of knowledge goes well beyond information and instructions. It reflects not only *what* we know but also *how* we know and how we *respond*

(perhaps even unconsciously) to what we know. It forms our sense of identity and becomes the filter for every piece of information we receive. Whereas the first kind of knowing may shape our *thoughts* to a degree, this kind shapes our *thought processes* (and therefore our thoughts) to a greater degree.

For example, if I dive into a lake or ocean and swim around for an hour or two, I experience something of marine life. I can practice different strokes, get used to holding my breath for longer periods, and work on distances and techniques. I *know* swimming. I might even start to think I swim like a fish. But if I'm a fish, moving around in the water is my nature. I don't even have to think about strokes or breath or what it takes to live in the water. I just do it. I know swimming without even knowing that I know it. It's part of who I am.

God has given us a new nature and called us to live from it. It's a radical transformation—so radical that we aren't quite sure how to do it. Many of us turn back to old paradigms, trying to live out our new life by reforming our old nature. We try to make the new ways “natural,” often by disciplining ourselves to conform to what we believe is true. In other words, we *know* and *do* by receiving information and acting on it.

But what if we really saw ourselves as new creations and gave no thought to any other possibility? What if it never even occurred to us that God might not be working in all the circumstances of our lives? What if love and worship were the default settings of our lives and we were shocked by anything else that came out of our hearts? What if our new nature was . . . well, natural?

There is no flip of a switch that gets us there, but some ways are better than others. I've experienced the futility of self-discipline born of knowing and doing (which, again, though insufficient, are still important). But I've also experienced the transformation that comes from that second kind of knowing—the radical reorientation of a worldview that shapes everything about us.

I call this radical reorientation *seeing* because we often express this deeper, more comprehensive knowledge in visual terms.

“I know you told me this would work, but I didn't *see* how.”

“I knew she cared, but now I *see* how much.”

“You can argue with me all you want, but the way I *see* it . . .”

We instinctively know there's a seeing that goes deeper than informational

knowledge, and this seeing transforms vital elements of our personality—our hopes and dreams; our gut feelings; our deeply rooted attitudes, instincts, and motives. Knowing information and responding to it may or may not change our heart. A radically new perspective does.

Embracing a new worldview may be catapulted forward by visual or sensory knowledge, or by seeing in a new way. They say a picture is worth a thousand words—a *million* seems closer to the mark—and is far more memorable too. That’s why the Bible is full of stories, parables, and experiences; why God inspired prophets to see visions and illustrate truth in tangible ways; and why he eventually clothed himself in human flesh to live among us. From beginning to end, God gives us images—highly visual and symbolic representations of who he is and what he does. We don’t just read his instructions; we see what living out the truth looks like. We don’t just read that he is a deliverer; we see numerous examples of dramatic deliverance. He doesn’t just tell us he cares for us; he inspires a king to portray him as a shepherd and his Son to dramatize sacrificial, unconditional love in eternally indelible ways. Those pictures and portrayals are life-changing.

If how we live flows out of who we are, being must come before doing. And if *seeing* so profoundly shapes *being*, then having this life-changing vision is vital. It is the key to the transformation we long for—that is, we become what we behold. The Holy Spirit works powerfully on the screens of our minds. We are drawn to whatever we focus on and emulate what we admire. Discipleship that begins with vision flows much more naturally into being and doing. Vision stirs us to be who we’re called to be and to live as we’re called to live.

The significance of our vision is the premise behind this devotional commentary series. The goal is to embrace a holistic, visual mode of learning. This series assumes that because we, as human beings, live from our identity and follow whatever vision we have, transformation happens by seeing in new ways. Instead of encouraging us simply to *know* and then *do*, the aim of these commentaries is to cast a vision for us to *see*, then *be*, then *live*. Like Jesus, who incorporated visual language into all his teaching, this series aims to refocus our inner eye. If we can see what the biblical writers saw and live according to that vision, we can be transformed.

## THE ART OF ENVISIONING

We must train our brains to see and think in new ways. It doesn't just happen. The biblical mandate to renew our minds implies a conscious reorientation of our thought life. Old thought patterns are stubborn; those established neural pathways actively resist new pathways as intruders (which is why New Year's resolutions, exercise and diet plans, and quitting a bad habit can be so difficult). In most areas of life, this neurological dynamic—tapping into our established neural pathways—is helpful; we don't have to relearn everything each day. But when we've been called to reorient the way we think, we have to be relentless about it.

At a practical level, we can greatly amplify this process by (1) recognizing the vision behind biblical texts; (2) immersing ourselves in that vision (declaring the truths of Scripture out loud can help with this, as our brain is very responsive to the sound of our own voice, even if, at first, we don't think we sound convincing); and (3) practicing the art of envisioning.

This latter practice has been somewhat disparaged over the past couple of centuries because we've associated it with "imagination"—as in, "that's *only* your imagination," or "that's just a figment of your imagination," as if our internal vision is no reflection of reality. This would be news to biblical prophets, psalmists, storytellers, and teachers of parables, who all used highly visual language to express truth. Our imagination *can* be used to disengage us from reality—in fact, that's what many people do with it—but it is also our primary means of envisioning truth, which is exactly why God gave us so many stories and images and illustrations. He *wants* us to see his Kingdom—to picture his nature, his purposes, and his work in our lives. It's impossible to read Jesus' parables, study the stories in Acts or in the Old Testament historical books, or read the Psalms and Prophets without developing certain images in our minds. Our lives change when we immerse ourselves in those images.

In envisioning the Kingdom of God and all God's ways, we aren't trying to convince ourselves of something that *isn't* true—simply a figment of our imagination. We're training ourselves in what *is*. Sanctified imagination is not a flight from reality; it's a flight directly into it. We insist that our natural minds, long steeped in limited vision and distorted ways of thinking, must now conform to reality as God defines it.

That's when transformation occurs. When we see God, ourselves, our world, and his Kingdom as he does, we rarely have to discipline ourselves to live differently. We just do it.

## IN THIS COMMENTARY

Because this is a *devotional commentary*, you will find material here that fits both descriptors: commentary on the text, and devotional or inspirational thoughts that apply the text to your life, specifically in the ways you see, become transformed, and live out that transformation. In this commentary you will find

- an introduction to the biblical book;
- an introduction for each subsection of the book, explaining its place and purpose in the text, the context or background of that section, and how it fits into the big-picture vision of biblical truth;
- a series of devotionals on the text that
  - further explain context, background, meaning, and purpose,
  - offer suggestions for practical application,
  - inspire and challenge you to *re-envision*—to learn to see in new ways;
- a discussion guide in the back to help you further reflect on the Scripture passages and/or talk about them with others to expand your spiritual vision even more.

As you read, practice the art of envisioning. Pray for Holy Spirit-inspired perspectives. Notice what and how the biblical writers see, and immerse your heart and mind in those visions. Adopt them as your own. More and more, you will enter into the heights and depths of God's Kingdom and live in his ways.

## INTRODUCTION TO PHILIPPIANS

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Philippi was as Roman as a Macedonian city could get. Ever since 42 BC, when Octavian (the future Caesar Augustus) declared it a colony after a pivotal battle in Rome’s civil war, it had been increasingly Romanized. The city was placed under the jurisdiction of Roman law, adopted Latin as its primary language, enjoyed tax-exempt status, and drew numerous Roman soldiers who settled there to live out their retirement. Less diverse than many colonies, Philippi had fewer “easterners” than the more cosmopolitan cities. Jews and Christians were thus small minorities—and were often treated with contempt because of it.

This minority status was apparent when Paul and his ministry companions first visited (Acts 16:11-12). The city had no synagogue, presumably because there were not enough Jewish men to establish one (a quorum of ten was required), so the travelers shared their message with a group of women who had gathered by the river on the Sabbath. But Paul and his companions knew God had led them to this place. Paul had wanted to make further headway in Asia Minor, but God redirected him—first by halting his plans and then by giving him a vision of a Macedonian man calling for help. So the team crossed the upper Aegean Sea and entered this new ministry frontier.

As they ministered throughout the city, they delivered a slave girl from a

malicious spirit that was making her a profitable fortune teller, provoking a mob reaction—always dangerous in a Roman colony, risking the city’s special privileges. The city magistrates dealt with Paul and Silas harshly, only to find out the next day that they had imprisoned two Roman citizens without a trial—also risky in a Roman colony. At the pleading of the city officials, who recognized their own precarious situation, Paul and his team departed, leaving behind a fledgling congregation in a city very suspicious of its beliefs.

The whole episode highlighted several important aspects of Philippian society—its emphasis on citizenship, its connections with Rome and its military, its disdain for unauthorized or unfamiliar religions, and its pressure on those who didn’t fit the culture or who threatened the status quo. Philippian believers had to live against the grain of their culture, as most believers do, and Paul recognized the challenges they were facing.

Years later, most likely when Paul was under house arrest in Rome, he received a gift of financial and moral support from this congregation. And he remembered them fondly. Comments in some of his letters tell us that he had kept in touch with them, and from time to time he had heard from co-workers who had been there. Relative to other young congregations, the church in Philippi was doing well. But it wasn’t free of problems. Anytime God begins a new work, there seems to be backlash—opposition from the outside or threats from within. In the case of the Philippian believers, it was some of both.

## **LIFE AS A PHILIPPIAN CHRISTIAN**

Imagine yourself as a believer in Jesus in this first-century church at Philippi. When Paul and his team came through the city, your eyes were opened to the power of God and the message of salvation. Even now, some years later, you still remember the thrill of being part of a new, life-changing movement. But living out an unsanctioned religion in a community that looks down on “eastern” influences—like faith in the Hebrew God and a Jewish Messiah—hasn’t been easy. Polytheists and proponents of the imperial cult don’t approve of your foreign beliefs, and traveling Jewish teachers—even some who believe in Jesus—don’t approve of Gentiles claiming their God without fully embracing his law. In the religious landscape of your city, you’re caught between competing forces with high-pressure tactics.

Meanwhile, your small congregation is showing some cracks in its foundation. Some people are in danger of caving to the pressure of the Jewish legalists; two influential women who are at odds with each other are threatening the unity of the fellowship. A visit from your church's founding apostle might help settle things down, but he's under house arrest in Rome, and his fate seems very uncertain.

It would be easy in this kind of situation to get discouraged. From all appearances, the gospel isn't binding people together in close fellowship as it should, and it isn't yet transforming the culture of the city, at least not noticeably. Your fledgling movement still exists under the thumb of imperial authority, Rome's authorized religions, and the eclectic religious culture around you. The universal truth you've believed in appears to be a small light in a vast, dark world.

But that's the problem, isn't it? Things aren't always as they appear. What looks like a position of defeat is really the launching point of a world-transforming faith. What looks like a local dispute will actually become a subject in a letter that profoundly changes people's lives for at least the next two millennia. What seems to be a cacophony of competing beliefs is really the context for sorting out the principles of a faith that will eventually cover the planet and bring glory to God. The Philippians don't yet see the implications of their community of faith. They're stuck in the small picture. They need a bigger, clearer vision.

We all do. How we see God, ourselves, the people around us, and the world itself shapes everything about us. Vision—our microvision of today's responsibilities, our macrovision of our life's purpose, and everything in between—is what drives us. When our hearts are filled with a vision of some possible future, we are inspired to pursue it. But when our eyes are filled only with the problems in front of us, we become easily disheartened—even when those circumstances don't tell the whole story. Everything depends on what we choose to see.

On his first visit to Philippi, as well as on many other occasions, Paul had seen God overrule circumstances and leverage them for powerful purposes. Opposition and "setbacks" catapulted Paul and Silas in their work at Philippi moving forward. Paul was quite familiar with the dynamic of God using a crisis to usher his Kingdom into a situation. The key component in that process was

faith—the kind evidenced by Paul and Silas when they worshiped God in prison after being ruthlessly beaten. They were well acquainted with the art of envisioning the truth behind the scenes.

Like all Scripture, Paul's letter to the Philippians reorients our vision. It is clear throughout this letter that he was at peace and that the believers at Philippi weren't. And the difference is perspective. He clearly wanted to change how they viewed their (and his) circumstances. By reframing the picture, he gave them reasons to celebrate, endure, heal their divisions, and move forward in faith. And he gave us a field manual for seeing our lives with new eyes.

### **PAUL'S POWERFUL RHETORICAL STRATEGY**

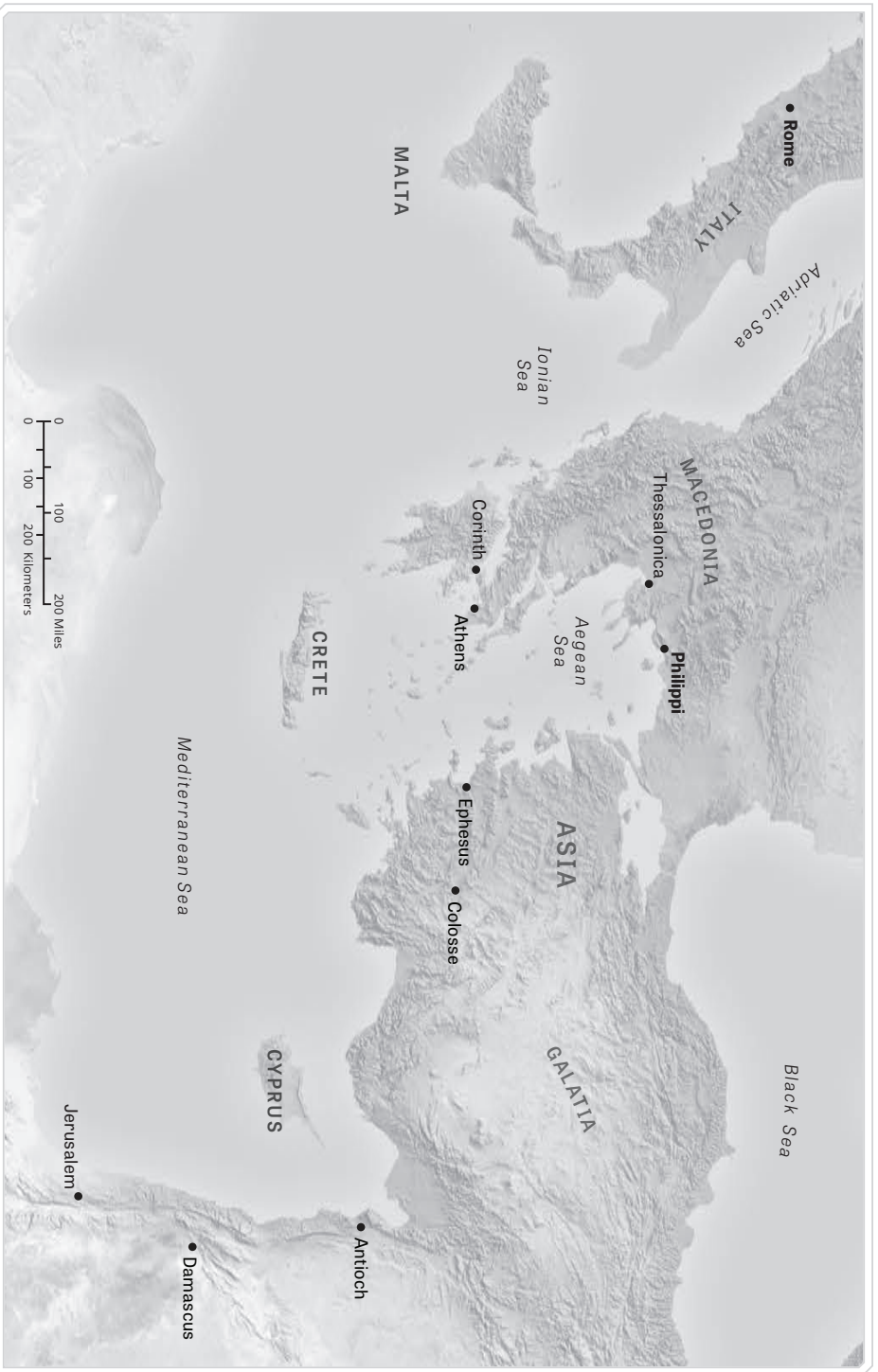
This letter is a masterpiece in pairing instructions with real-life examples of those instructions. Paul not only teaches the values and attitudes he wants his readers to have; he also demonstrates them. In fact, he explicitly points to himself as a role model in case they happen not to catch the hints, urging them to continue in his instructions (2:12), follow his pattern (3:17), and imitate whatever they saw him doing (4:9).

- Just as Paul had rooted his life in heavenly realities and what ultimately matters (1:21-23; 3:7-14), he encouraged the Philippians to similarly root their lives and focus on their ultimate purpose (1:27; 3:20-21). Both he and the Philippian believers would receive everything they needed not from the resources of the world but from God's riches in glory (4:19).
- Just as Paul consistently and repeatedly chose to rejoice regardless of whatever else was going on (1:3-4, 15-18; 2:17; 4:10), the Philippians were to anchor their lives in joy in every situation (2:18, 29; 3:1; 4:4).
- Just as Paul recognized the big picture and viewed every circumstance, even adversity, positively (1:12-14, 20-26; 3:7-8, 12-14; 4:12-13), he wanted his readers also to focus on the big picture and to see their adversity positively in light of what God was doing in it (1:10, 27-30; 3:15; 4:6-9).
- Like Jesus (2:5-8), Paul had humbled himself in willingness to serve and sacrifice for others (1:1; 2:17; 3:7-8), as had Timothy and Epaphroditus

(2:19-30). Now the Philippians were to follow suit and humble themselves in service and sacrifice for others (2:3-5, 14-15; 4:2), in contrast to certain selfish people Paul mentions (1:17; 2:21; 3:18-19).

- Just as Paul affirmed and honored others, including the Philippians (1:3-8; 2:19-30; 4:1, 14-17), the Philippians were to affirm and honor others (2:3-4, 29).
- Paul had clearly trained his mind not to worry but to think good, hope-filled, joyful thoughts—a pattern he demonstrates in nearly every aspect of the letter but especially in 1:6, 12-26; 3:7-11; and 4:12-13. The Philippians likewise are encouraged to train their minds to think good thoughts and not be anxious (2:2, 14; 4:4-8).
- Just as Paul allowed the affection and compassion of Christ to fill his heart for these believers (1:7-8), they were to feel the affection and compassion of Christ for each other (2:1-4; 4:2-3).

By including both instruction and example, the letter provides words that teach and pictures that demonstrate. Like most of Scripture, Philippians is an exercise in envisioning truth. Paul's goal was that as the Philippians re-envisioned the truth they had first been taught—as they reoriented themselves to the big vision they had embraced as new believers—their lives would be changed.



# PHILIPPIANS

# 1:1-11

## RECONNECTIONS

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In many respects, the first part of this letter is standard for Paul's letters. Paul identifies himself and Timothy as the authors, greets the Philippians, calls them "God's holy people in Philippi who belong to Christ Jesus," and proceeds to express appreciation for them. While these elements are conventional, they are also filled with unusual warmth. Of all the churches established and overseen by Paul, the Philippian church was relatively problem-free. He seems to have been particularly close to them and remembers them fondly.

### BACKGROUND

Under house arrest in Rome, Paul had quite a bit of freedom to receive visitors and correspondence from the outside. The Philippians had sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, to see Paul and deliver a financial gift. One of the reasons

Paul wrote this letter was to acknowledge that gift and show his appreciation for it. He calls them “partners” (1:5), partly because of their history of generosity with him, and partly because he saw them as supportive co-workers who were continuing the mission in Philippi in the years he was away.

But Paul had other reasons for writing too. Epaphroditus had apparently filled him in on some of their troubles—some from outside the fellowship, some from within—and Paul was never short on advice. He understood as well as anyone how to deal with opposition from those outside the community, and he was also well acquainted with friction among those within. The believers needed to know how to navigate such challenges, and he was rather experienced in dealing with them. Chiefly, he wanted them to focus on “what really matters” (1:10). The trivial can easily take center stage, and for some of the Philippians it evidently had.

## **THE BIG PICTURE**

Because love is the foundation of God’s Kingdom, relationships are the priority in the Christian life. Paul will address some of the Philippians’ relational issues as the letter progresses, but he sets the tone up front by reconnecting with them relationally as their far-away friend who is near in spirit. They had reconnected with him by sending financial support, not as a mere transaction, but as a sign of their affection. In return, he expresses his affection for them.

As Christians, we tend to focus a lot on truth and doctrine, and we can easily push our relational bonds into the background. In this letter, Paul pulls relationship back to the forefront, and he does so in strongly emotional terms. He wants to touch his readers’ hearts because that’s where love, unity, and ultimate calling are meant to flourish. Regardless of whatever he teaches them and however he corrects them, they need to know that his words are written in the context of a lasting, loving relationship.

## A MODEL OF TRUTH

.....

# Philippians 1

After a brief salutation and blessing, Paul opens his letter to the Philippians with some affirming words for them and comments about his current situation. On the surface, he seems to be encouraging them in their faith and calming their concerns. But as the letter unfolds, it will become clear that there is much more between the lines here. The apostle who later urges his readers to show their affection for each other, refuse to complain, live as lights in the midst of darkness, rejoice, be anxious for nothing, dwell on what's good and true, and be content in all situations is modeling all these attitudes for them right from the start. He sets himself up as the example of what he will teach them.

At least four issues relayed in this first chapter give Paul an opportunity to be downcast or distraught. He could easily look at the division in the Philippian church, his own confinement, rival preachers who are jockeying for spiritual status, and the possibility of his execution as the basis for a negative outlook. He could be angry about the factions that seem to be developing, be outraged over the injustice of his situation, criticize the self-promoting teachers, and fear for his own life.

Instead, he emphasizes the positive in each of these circumstances: Yes, the Philippians are in a growth process, but God will certainly bring them to

maturity. Sure, his imprisonment is unfair, but God is reaching people who otherwise would not be reached. True, the rivalrous preachers have impure motives, but they are still getting the name of Jesus out there. And yes, Paul might die, but it's still a win-win situation—he will either be with Christ or bear more fruit. In spite of all the apparent crises, Paul is relentlessly hopeful.

Why? Because he sees who God is. He has a clear vision of God's nature and character, and he interprets everything in light of that vision. Because he knows who he is in Christ and how faithful God is to his promises, Paul can simply rejoice and trust that God is powerfully at work in everything—even when other observers see nothing but trouble.

When we have a skewed vision of God, we see our captivities, adversaries, and setbacks as referendums on whether we are in good standing with him. *Did I step out of his will? Am I being disciplined? Are my prayers falling on deaf ears? Where is the promise of divine favor?* Our experiences become the criteria by which we interpret God. Or to put it another way, we see God through the lens of our circumstances.

We see none of this with Paul. He was well trained in the art of seeing circumstances through the lens of God. Lest we think he had some sort of advantage as a superapostle, we need only to look back at his original experience in Philippi—the confusing journey to this new frontier, the unexpected absence of a synagogue, the riot that led to his beating and imprisonment, and the legal dispute with city magistrates. In all these potentially disorienting experiences, in spite of the tyranny of circumstances, Paul had seen God come through again and again. He had learned to read between the lines of his surroundings and envision the bigger picture.

That's our calling, too, and Paul models it for us just as clearly as he did for the Philippian believers. We can stop second-guessing our situations and trust that God is working in them. He is unequivocally faithful to his people. When we see that, we, too, become rejoicing, grateful observers of his unfolding purposes in our lives.

## **RE-ENVISION GOD**

If you aren't certain of God's kindness and faithfulness to you, much of what happens in your life will cause fear and anxiety. Insecurity about your life

reflects insecurity with him. But he has already declared you to be secure in him. He is *for* you (Romans 8:31). If he has promised to work all things for the good of his people, then all things are redeemable. Learn to see him at work in every situation to fulfill this promise. Notice the good he is accomplishing and trust him to complete it. You will face adversity, setbacks, and losses in life, but even the worst are lined with strong elements of hope. Like Paul, learn to worship in the darkest places, and the light will become clear in the midst of them.