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Brimming with Hope (Philippians 1:3-11) *Hope for Change*

Thank you so much for that ministry of music. It is beautiful as it proclaims the Lord in song which the Scriptures instruct us to, to tell of our hope. And this morning we begin on a new sermon series called *Hope for Change*. It is a series that will carry us up until the missions conference, which will be the first two weeks of February. Over the next number of weeks---this morning the beginning---this morning will be an overview of where we're headed in the weeks to come. It is based on a workbook, and it is based on work produced by Christian Counseling Educational Foundation called *How People Change*. This is a course that we're going to be teaching this spring, beginning midwinter, February 16, which you'll be hearing more about in the coming weeks.

But it is looking at the nature of how people---as they come to know the Lord Jesus Christ and they continue to grow in the Lord Jesus Christ---how we change as people. Broadly speaking, they look at the New Testament trajectory of change, how God uses and even allows difficulty and trial---what the Bible would call 'heat'---to come into our lives. And when heat and trial and challenge come into our lives it often exposes 'thorns'---sin in our lives. It often exposes patterns of behavior that illustrate ways in which we need to grow and to look more like our Savior. And so from heat, thorns are produced, and then the cross comes into play---how the cross addresses sins and sin patterns that the heat has exposed. But then ultimately how the cross not only exposes the thorns, but how it heals it and then brings us into a place where we are producing the fruit of the Spirit. And so heat, thorn, cross, and fruit---this is how we change, guided by God's Spirit, empowered by the Spirit, and empowered by the Word.

And this morning we're looking at this series as a whole as we begin. The title, of course you'll see in your outline---it's "Brimming with Hope." As you look into this new year, are you brimming with hope? No answer....such a Presbyterian crowd. So as you think about yourself, surely over these last few days or the next few days, I would encourage you to deep introspection. Not navel-gazing for the sake of navel-gazing, but to seriously take stock of your life. As you look at your own life, do you have hope? As you look at others that you're in relationship with, do you have hope for their change? Do you hope you can change them? How much do they hope they can change you?

So as we begin thinking about this this morning, how does Paul want us to be characterized? I would argue that it would be this: that we would be a people that are brimming with hope. Not a false, shallow or hollow hope, but one that is sturdy, that is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ and his work.

So let's look together. Philippians 1:3-11.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ---to the glory and praise of God.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Please will you pray with me again. Heavenly Father, we now ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit and through the power of your Word, may you make us a people of hope with a vision for what it is you are doing and the means by which you are doing it---

that you desire that we reflect the image, the power, and the character of Christ Jesus our Lord. Now, Lord, equip us and help us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So this morning what I've done is I've taken the text before you, looking at verses 3-6, verses 7-8, and 9-11, looking at the ways in which Paul is beginning to examine and to look and to talk to this young church plant. You'll see in the outline that he means to draw them to *The Source of Authentic Confidence*....and yes, Christian, we are called to Christian confidence that should characterize our gathering together and our understanding of who Christ is. And secondly, *The Partnership of Grace* that we are to have because of what God is doing. And then finally, *The Content of Gospel Hope*.

But let me give you a brief introduction to the letter itself. I'm thankful for the work of Moisés Silva, who was one of the preeminent New Testament scholars. I'll give a brief introduction to the situation in which Paul was writing. Paul was a part---in his second missionary journey of three that he took---of planting this church. Timothy administered there. This was a very close relationship that he had with this church. He had made a deep impression in their lives. They had a very close relationship with him, to a degree that they had continually over and over again sought to support him financially in whatever way that they could, to encourage the ministry of the gospel. At the time in which they decided to send a letter to Paul, he was already at that point in jail. And the letter that they received was written to them while he was in jail for preaching and defending---and as he says---confirming the gospel. [Their] letter was to reach him much sooner than it actually did. Epaphroditus was the one who was to bring him this letter, but he fell ill and reached Rome much later.

But when Paul finally received a letter, what he learned was that this young church plant that he had been a part of, had started with great guns, and they were full of encouragement, and they were continuing---even up to him receiving this letter, even though it was a difficult letter, apparently---that they were still sending support and encouragement. But in this letter he clearly learned that while they had started off strong, they were now experiencing real discouragement, they were experiencing opposition, because Paul's teaching now had already begun to spread across this part of the Roman Empire. So not only was Paul seeing greater and greater numbers of those who were converting from Judaism to Christianity [and] also greater conversion among Gentiles, [but] he was also seeing greater opposition, which is why he was in jail. But the letter he likely received from the church at Philippi was also the fact that opposition was also being seen at the church there. And so he's writing in response to what he likely heard from them, trying to remind them and direct them to where their source of hope really is, regardless of their circumstances.

And so he sets out to write to them. And what you would find if you were to sit down and read this letter in one sitting, you will find that it is full of talk about love, grace, joy, and hope. These he means to be the characteristics of the Christian life. But when we are honest, are those the things which most characterize our faith, if indeed you are a Christian? If you are not yet a Christian, most of what I'm going to say may seem foreign to you, but the invitation is still the same. Whether if somebody is a Christian for a long time or you have never known him, coming to Christ is by the same path and by the same power. And so this message is to you an invitation to hope and to real change.

So let's look together. In the first opening verses, 3-5, he unpacks the source of authentic confidence. He says, after he tells them that he remembers them in prayer continually, knowing that this is the first time he mentions it, knowing that they have decided to partner with him in the ministry of the gospel---that he then tells them that the reason and the source for his prayers and for his ministry is from one thing, and he says, verse 6: "Being confident of this..." Being confident of their partnership in the gospel, being confident of his prayers for them in the Lord---being confident of this, he then says, "That he," speaking of Christ, "who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." This for Paul is the source of Christian confidence. And if Christ is the source of Christian confidence, if his power and his promise that which he began through working and

demonstrating and revealing himself to Paul and his coming to Christ---if he can be radically transformed from that person who did not believe to a person who believes---if that's what God did to bring him to Christ, how much more then will he not bring it to completion 'til the day when---Paul has already said before---when Christ returns in glory.

And so for Paul he is reminding us that the source of Christian confidence is not ourselves. It is not our intellectual grasp. It is not our ability to form and to lay out and to believe a set of doctrinal principles and truths from Scriptures---which we are called to do, and we do---that our source of real confidence is not in our ability to understand it. That the source of real Christian confidence is not in ourselves, but in Christ alone---not even in our understanding of who he is and all that he has done, but in the fact that he understands us.

This was important for John Calvin, who wrote at an early age---26 years old when he wrote his first theologies, which are called *The [Institutes] of the Christian Religion*. I've begun rereading these as I go into the new year. And one of the things that comes clear in what he says is the following quote: "There is no worse screen to block out the Spirit's work than confidence in our own intelligence." Let me repeat that again. "There is no worse a screen to block out the Spirit's work, than confidence in our own intelligence."

We'll unpack this a little bit later in just a few minutes, but to start here---and this is important for us who are well-educated, surrounded by a well-educated community. And those of you who profess faith, who are in the tradition of Presbyterianism, we fancy ourselves as the theologians of the church, we fancy ourselves as those who have systematic doctrine. And we do...we have a lot of it, and it is really good. But oftentimes what we begin to do is, we begin to mistake and confuse an understanding, a writing, and a summary of Christian doctrine, as having confidence in God. You can have complete confidence in doctrine and yet have no confidence in the Lord. You can know him intellectually, you can know him doctrinally, but be far from who he is personally.

And so Paul calls us, not to greater doctrinalization---which do not leave here and think that I have any problems with doctrine. I do not. I hold and hold myself to a great host of doctrines of the Scriptures. But he reminds us that those are not the source of our confidence, but Christ alone---for fear that when we begin to invest confidence in our own intelligence, we then become very unstable in our hope. Because what if everything around us in our circumstances begins to scream loudly against what we say we believe? What then? Because oftentimes that's the way life works.

In fact, if you read the Bible, that's the way the Bible works. There are people who find themselves in very paradoxical situations, Job being one of them. The world seems to scream out, and reality seems to scream at us: This should not be the case! Is that not what the disciples said with regard to Christ: 'You cannot go to the cross.' Because their understanding of God, which was orthodox and acceptable, did not allow for the possibility that God the Son would die on the cross and be raised on the third day. So with Paul, he means to draw us to the power and promise of Christ alone as the source of our hope and confidence.

Now remember, if you have been a Christian for any time and you've read a part of the New Testament, you will notice something very interesting. Well over half of the New Testament books are written by this man, Paul. You learn that fairly early on as a Christian. And another thing you learn early on is the fact that he was a persecutor of the church. And over time you've heard that story, you've read of his testimony in the book of Acts. And you hear Paul talk about himself. But it's very easy for that to simply become rote understanding. But, if you will, allow me for just a brief minute to remind you of the one who's writing this letter to us.

This is a man, who, had we met him, we would have considered him to be the most righteous and godly man we have ever met. He was zealous beyond anything we have personally likely experienced. And what he did with his righteousness and with his zeal---he turned it [toward those whom] he believed to be in opposition to God's good will, and so therefore he fought the gospel. He fought the conversion of Christians to the point of persecuting them to death. He personally oversaw the stoning of Christians. It is this man...this man...who now says to the church, I am in chains because of my preaching and my confirming and defending the very gospel and the very Christ that I once warred against. Isn't that amazing?

And it's this one who can say, I pray for you. I pray for you with a confidence not of my own intelligence, not of my own doctrines, but one based in a Person whose power and promise is real. And do not forget, this onetime persecutor of the church who fought Christ and the gospel, is now the one who declares to you: "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Isn't that amazing?

Do you see then, that if this is the kind of confidence that he can have, and a joy that fuels his prayers, that a hope that fulfills and gives him a great vision for what Christ can do---how much more, then, are we---who now see what Christ has done over the last two thousand years, and how the church is expanded, how many millions of people been brought to Christ, how many of your lives have been changed---our confidence should not be diminishing. It should be growing ever more.

He then looks at them and he says, because this is the source of confidence and hope for change---that is, Christ---it doesn't happen in a vacuum. Christ brings us into partnership with one another as the church. This is why he's writing to them. Verse 5, he begins one theme, and he repeats it in verse 7. He talks about this partnership of grace. Verse 7. "It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me." He's talking about this Greek word *koinonia*, which we often translate as 'fellowship,' which quite frankly is a fuzzy word, is it not, because of how we tend to use it in the church. We tend to think of fellowship as coffee and doughnuts and sharing a 'hello' between services or after the service. But the biblical understanding of *koinonia* or 'fellowship' is far more akin to partnership---of locking arms together with others who profess faith in Jesus Christ.

Go about the work of growing in Christ because the source of confidence is Christ, but it isn't just for you as an individual, to be alone. It is to gather with other Christians---which we call the church---to partner together, to lock arms, to do a number of things. Yes, eat together, pray together, cry together, laugh together, celebrate together, worship together. It is a whole host of things that ultimately leads to serving together. See, if we're partners, we can think of partnership like being teammates. When I am weak, I need your strength. When I am lacking hope, I need you to speak a word of hope to me. When I am weak, I need to hear how the Lord has taught you something over the last week.

And what that implies is what Paul demonstrates to us in his relationship with the church at Philippi. That is, over a period of time through difficulty and challenge, through hurting each other and helping each other, what has happened is a faithful presence has been established. Men and women, building relationships. Which is why in this church we increasingly want to become a church that doesn't have small groups as a program---but that we become a church of of small groups. Why? Because while this morning we celebrate together as a body, that this isn't where partnership ends. This is where partnership begins. And then throughout the week you are meeting at each other's homes, practicing hospitality, reaching out to your neighbors, serving one another, and encouraging one another. Why? Because that is what we were built for.

Because Paul tells us when he says these words in verse 7: "All of you share in God's grace with me." So the grace that God has worked in Paul, he shares it with others. And the grace that God has shared with the church at Philippi, they share with him. That is their partnership. This is what I'm getting at when I've referred to the Christian is the image of a colander. That God's grace is the water that pours in. But we are the colanders through which the water, the grace of God, flows in us and through us, because we don't have to worry the source---it will never run out. But rather we are to be channeling it to others, and you channeling it to us.

But you know what that takes? That takes time, and it's painful. It's hard work. It's going to challenge us and our patience. It's going to challenge us and our faithfulness. Because you know what? We are going to hurt each other. We're going to misinterpret each other. We're going to be cold towards one another. And we're going to have to come to each other and ask for forgiveness. And you know what that means? That means we have to apply the gospel right there. But that's what partnership of grace looks like. It's not the partnership of grace when everybody's great and happy and fine, but sometimes it's just faithful listening when you have no answer. Sometimes it's the prayer that you prayed by yourself, and then you sent a note, an e-mail---whatever---to that friend and said, I prayed for you this morning. It's getting together on a regular basis, sharing your deepest struggles, but also your greatest praises and everything in between. It is the partnership of grace.

You see, this is the design. As one writer said: The more of this partnership in God's grace, the more of this common experience, the more mutual help, the deeper the affection, the greater the pleasure in our brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ, the more frequent and fervent the prayers for one another---and there is this also---the more some of you connect to one another in the ways of God's grace, the more all of us fall into the orbit of your love, and of Christ's love through you. That is, the love you show to each other---that will begin to have ripple effects across the entire congregation. Because the more we do it, the more it spreads, the more the water of God's grace is poured out person to person to person. But it requires God's grace, and our partnership with it.

Okay. So with all this being true, with Christ being the source of the hope for change, and that change being a part of the partnership of grace with other fellow believers, then what is the content of this gospel hope? What is the content of the change which it brings about? Paul tells us in verses 9-11, and he tells us just a few things. He says: "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ Jesus, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ."

The first thing he tells them is that they may abound in love more and more. Now I use this idea of brimming with hope. Almost like overflowing. When he says that they may abound in love, he means that it's a love that is overflowing outside of the boundary life of just you and of your heart. That God's love is so being poured on you and in you through Christ, that it is also pouring out of you. And he's praying that they would be able to grow in this. That means he's saying that the fuel...the fuel of the hope, the content of gospel hope, is love itself.

Love is the central, indispensable characteristic of the Christian life. My friends, if you haven't read again 1 Corinthians 13, go do so today. And what you will learn is it has nothing to do with weddings and marriages and all those kinds of things. It has to do with a church that was deeply struggling with this problem of love. But what you learn is that love is of a higher priority than growing in knowledge or growing in giftedness. We often invert that. Someone who has gifts, we put them in leadership. Someone who has knowledge, we set them up and look to them for understanding. But you can have---as I said earlier---great knowledge, and you can have great gifts, but lack the character of Christ. What is the character of Christ? Paul tells us. What is the content for which the change is

working towards, is that we might be a people abounding in love. Abounding in love. Not the warm, fuzzy, kind of shallow thing. But growing in other-centeredness and out of self-centeredness.

But not only are we to grow in love, he also says we are to grow in knowledge. But notice love comes before knowledge? And for Paul, growing and abounding in love that then guides our knowledge.... what is the knowledge that he's talking about? The knowledge that he's talking about is knowledge of God and knowledge of self. Knowledge of God and knowledge of self. For Calvin, this, too, was important. In fact, if you've ever looked at his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, you'll notice, that of all things you would expect him to begin his great *Institutes of Christian Religion* with, you would never guess at this, and it's summarized in one quick sentence. This is exactly the whole first part of his writings. It's these words: "Nearly all the wisdom which we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists in two parts. The knowledge of God and of ourselves." And here's what he says. He says, "Therefore, that to grow in the knowledge of God leads us in a true knowledge of ourselves."

You see, for Calvin and for Paul, a growing in knowledge and a depth of knowledge and depth of insight means we grow in our understanding of the character of God. That he is love. That out of him flows joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the things which characterize who God is. And for Calvin and for Paul and for us that is what fills the content of our love---that our love towards one another is part and parcel of our growing love of him. And a growing level of him means we grown in a depth of knowledge and insight as to who he is.

But guess what happens when we do that? We begin to also have a deeper knowledge of who we are. I've explained it this way. As a cyclist during the wintertime I have to use a headlamp. And I've used it before and I'll use it again. It's really bright. And in the dark I feel really great, because it's so bright I can blind drivers who look like they're going to pull out in front of me. It's really rather fun. But in the dark I can scare deer so they don't run out in front of me. And it's helpful. But I feel so, like, powerful with this huge light coming off the top of my helmet....until the sun rises. And then I see my light---and truly what kind of light it is only in comparison to the source of light, which is the sun. And I look at this and it might as well be a 20-watt bulb next to a massive spotlight.

You see as we grow in knowledge and depth of insight of who God is and of his character---for Paul that also means that the depth of understanding ourselves means we begin to go...to have an understanding of ourselves that goes down. We see how perfect and righteous and holy he is, and we begin to see ourselves at how far short we fall.

Now notice what I'm doing. Our view of God goes this way, our view of ourselves goes this way. Imagine that there was a rubber band that I'm holding. The farther that those two poles get from each other---if there was a rubber band connecting the two, what happens? The tension grows tighter and tighter and tighter. And oftentimes for the Christian this is exactly what happens. A view of God goes way up. The view of themselves goes way down. And they have a proper understanding of how sinful we are compared to his holiness and a tension is created. And we're often tempted to do one of two things to solve the unbearable tension. We either say God really isn't that holy, or I'm really not that bad. But to grow in love and depth of knowledge and insight is to be able to solve that tension in only one way: the cross of Christ.

That it is only the cross that enables me to have a true depth of knowledge and insight of how glorious and beautiful God is, but [also] the true nature of my own soul, which would enable Paul to say, I am the chief of sinners. How could he do that with such confidence? It is because of the cross. His knowledge of God as love, and gracious and merciful, but at the same time, his depth of sin. The only solution is the cross.

But he then says, not only to grow in love and knowledge and depth of insight, it's discernment. To be able to distinguish between what is good and what is bad, what is important and what is trivial, and to be able to do and to understand all of that. He says to grow in this discernment so that we "may remain pure and blameless until the day of Christ." It doesn't mean that we become perfect. It means that our dependence is less and less on other things, on ourselves---and more on him. This is what Paul is demonstrating as the content of our hope.

But isn't that the problem? You probably could've guessed where I was going. Of love and knowledge and depth of insight. But the problem is when we look at ourselves we get very discouraged, don't we. And when we're honest, we also get very discouraged with other people, too. We think, you know if I had the option I would choose to change this about you that I see. And guess what they are saying? Guess what? Guess what I would change about you? And we grow very impatient. In fact, we grow very discouraged.

Let me ask you a series of questions, quickly. One. When you look at your life, if you are a Christian, what do you see? What catches your eye? Do you only see problems, and you give up and walk away? When you look inward do you see problems and become defensive or angry, or both? When you look inside and you see the gap between where you are and who God is, do you find yourself wanting to diminish his holiness? Or do you try to diminish the reality of the problems and sin that you see in your own life?

We often look at our lives and the lives of others and become discouraged. And that can lead in one of two directions. Either we can learn and grow in godly dependence as the source for real hope, or we will grow in cynicism that is born of self-dependence. Discouragement left unaddressed, that tension not solved by the cross, will lead us not to greater godliness, but greater selfishness. And when selfishness begins to display itself in greater and greater failure, when you're honest with yourself, you become cynical about the possibility for real change in your life and real change in other people's lives, and you give up.

Is that where we are to be left? Is that how we should begin this new year? Obviously, no. You could have imagined that. But let me address one issue, and it is this: the problem of impatience. One psychologist said this: "The problem is that in this country you can have what you want when you want it most of the time. People like the fact that they can buy a fifty foot tree and instantly plant it in their yard. Why on earth would anyone want to wait on relationships or wait on God?"

One issue that we must address is, we must meet discouragement and patience to recognize that the pace of change should not distract us from the source of the change. God's work, Paul tells us, is until Christ returns, and we don't know when that will be. We don't know how long our lives will be. But knowing Christ and walking with him is a lifelong process, and it will take weeks and months and years for change to really grip because it doesn't happen overnight. But if our confidence isn't in the cross, if our confidence is not in his grace, in his mercy, we will grow discouraged and we will grow very impatient with each other. But Paul draws us, and he says: You are going to be kept "blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ---to the glory and praise of God." He draws us back.

So my thought to you is this. The answers to the questions which I just uttered earlier---when you look into your life, what do you see? When you look into the lives of others, what you see? Do you grow discouraged or defensive or angry or impatient? Your answers to these questions and my answers to these questions and others like them demonstrate the reality...the reality and the structure of our faith at ground level---not what we say we believe, but how we really live. Which is why we need the source of hope for change from Christ himself. Paul means for us to be driven towards Christ as the source of change and the substance of it. Remember what he said: He who began a good work in

you will bring it to completion on the day of his appearing. That means we are being made more and more into the likeness of Christ and the character of our God regardless of where we start. It is his to work. So what is your vision? What is your confidence? What do you see?

Toyota has a fabulous ad campaign out right now. It doesn't make me want to buy a Toyota, but I'm going to use it as a sermon illustration. There's a young boy with a baseball bat and a beautiful baseball diamond. Friends and family are all gathered around playing baseball. The ball gets pitched to him, and the camera, the video is watching, and he hits the ball and right there the frame stops. And you think the commercial's going to go moving on to the future. But what does is, it goes in reverse. And what we thought was the beginning---a kid hitting a baseball in a really nice baseball field---now goes into reverse. And what looks to be a beautifully manicured baseball diamond in a suburban utopia turns out in reverse to have started in a very un-manicured, very messy backyard with that same boy receiving the same ball from his brother. He hits the ball and the ball goes right through the kitchen plate glass window. And the father, seeing the glass around, looks out through the broken window, and he has a vision for what he wants to do. Now they want us to think that that's going to make us buy Toyotas, because somehow the Toyota is going to help us have that vision.

Anyway, here's the point. From the broken plate glass window we could not have envisioned what ended up being built in that backyard. When Paul says that we will be brought to completion, that a good work that was begun through the working of Christ will be brought to completion in the image of Christ Jesus, we can't imagine what that's going to look like. All we can see is the broken plate glass window of our lives, of our relationships, of our emotions, of our circumstances---and all we see is glass. But the hope for change is this: that Christ Jesus came down into the broken glass. He came down into the messy backyard that is our lives and became flesh to die on the cross and to be raised on the third day. And the vision that what we will be, we can't imagine. But we know that that is the promise, but our Father can see it. And he has begun a good work, and he will bring it to completion. How much more, then, should we not be brimming with hope of what God wants to do in you and in us.

Let's pray. So Lord, if you mean to make us into the image of your Son, to live embodied the characteristics of Christ, and if you have the completion in mind at the day of Christ's return, then, Lord, we pray, give us the hope and the confidence in your power to bring about change. Meet us in our discouragement this morning. Meet us in the broken glass. And we ask you, Lord, give us the hope and the vision for what you want to do in and through us as individuals and as a church through Jesus Christ alone, in whose mighty name we pray. Amen.