What delights me most is the course on The Epistle to the Philippians on Wednesdays. . . . Paul! That’s what it is! Next to him all dogmatics is slime, and ethics too.

—Karl Barth, letter to Eduard Thurneysen, May 18, 1924
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PHILIPPIANS 1

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons. 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 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.

1:1 Paul and Timothy—Christian ministry never takes place in a vacuum. Even when carried out by an individual, it is always a collaborative effort. Not even the original apostles could act on their own as “free agents.” Their ministry was always “conciliar” (Acts 15). It was always rooted in the apostolic community and carried out for the sake of the community. Paul’s vocation illustrates this point. While he might have written to the Philippians simply in his own name, he included Timothy in the byline as someone responsible for the contents of the letter. We do not know exactly what role Timothy might have played. Did he at least act as the scribe? As Paul’s interlocutor and companion, he would probably have been much more than that.

Paul’s relationship with Timothy was complex and many layered. We may assume that the letter was discussed carefully between them before being written and sent. Nevertheless, Paul was the mentor while Timothy served as his apprentice. Indeed, the older man was an apostle whose unique office could not be transferred to another, while the younger man (probably converted by Paul’s preaching) was being groomed as his emissary and successor. According to later...
tradition, Timothy would go on to become “bishop” of Ephesus and would die—like his mentor—as a martyr. Their unity-in-difference needs to be noted as carefully as their difference-in-unity.¹

servants of Christ Jesus—Paul and Timothy’s unity is derived from a higher authority. Whatever differences may have existed between an apostle and his successor, they were relativized by a larger consideration. Paul introduced himself and Timothy as being in the same category—namely, “servants” or “slaves” of Christ. Their lives were no longer their own, for they had been claimed in the service of another. They knew themselves to be entirely at Christ’s disposal, in life and in death. To be a “servant” (doulos) of this Lord meant having been set apart for a special task. As with some of God’s servants in the Hebrew scriptures (e.g., Isa. 53), a peculiar authority has been invested in Paul and Timothy that is finally inseparable from suffering and death.²

It is of some interest that Paul’s phrase “servants of Christ Jesus” echoes the term “servant of Yahweh” in the Old Testament. The name of Jesus seems to have been substituted for the name of the Lord. Any number of Old Testament figures were directly or indirectly depicted as Yahweh’s servants, including Moses, Joshua, David, and several of the prophets. By modifying a phrase that would have been familiar to Jewish people, Paul implies (and apparently takes for granted) the assertion that Jesus is somehow equal with God.³

¹. “The intercourse between Timothy and the Philippian church had been constant and intimate. He had assisted the Apostle in its first foundation. . . . He was there not improbably more than once during the captivity at Caesarea, when the Apostle himself was prevented from seeing them. And now again he was on the eve of another visit, having been chosen for this purpose, as one whose solicitude for the Philippians had become second nature.” Lightfoot, Philippians, 79 (slightly modified).

². The word “slave” (doulos) did not necessarily carry the kind of servile implications that would attach to it elsewhere. “Central features that distinguish 1st century slavery from that later practiced in the New World,” writes S. Scott Bartchy, “are the following: racial factors played no role; education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners) and enhanced a slave’s value; many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions; slaves could own property (including other slaves!); their religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the freeborn; no laws prohibited public assembly of slaves; and (perhaps above all) the majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30.” Bartchy, “Slavery (Greco-Roman),” 6:66. For an interesting fictional narrative about the life of a former slave in the first-century church, see Witherington, Life of Corinth. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that the life of slaves in the Roman Empire could often be very harsh. Seneca acknowledged that Romans treated their slaves cruelly. Some were forced to fight wild beasts in the arena. They were under total domination and submission to their masters. Even those slaves who received manumission, considered “freedmen,” continued to be forever in debt to their former masters. In a sense they were never really free of their servitude. See Smith, “Slavery in the Early Church.”

³. “It is noticeable how quietly St. Paul steps into the place of the prophets and leaders of the Old Covenant, and how quietly he substitutes the name of his own Master in a connection hitherto reserved for that of Yahweh.” Sanday and Headlam, Epistle to the Romans, 3 (slightly modified).
to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi — For Paul, as this salutation suggests, Jesus Christ is not only the supreme object of loyalty and devotion. He is also the mysterious figure of participation. All who take part “in Christ Jesus” (en Christo Iēsou) are for that reason established as “saints” (pasin tois hagiois). They are made holy by a holiness not their own.

I would suggest that the phrase “in Christ” has a double aspect. It is, for lack of better terms, at once “mystical” and “apocalyptic.” In this verse it is used to suggest a status of holiness through spiritual union with Christ (the mystical side). The mystical interpretation that I suggest includes both personal union with Christ and membership in Christ’s body, the church. At the same time this holiness remains ineffable. Despite being real in itself, it is a holiness that still remains hidden apart from the eyes of faith. It is yet to be revealed in glory at the end of all things (the apocalyptic side). (For further discussion of the phrase “in Christ,” see excursus 1.)

The faithful do not participate in Christ without being truly holy (and so they are called “saints”), yet their holiness remains hidden with Christ in God. Only at the end of all things, with the resurrection of the dead, will it be unveiled for what it is and has been all along. Until that day their holiness will be displayed only imperfectly on earth. It remains undiminished in Christ while standing in tension with their lesser selves on earth.

Therefore to be “in Christ” while still “at Philippi” does not mean that the “saints” in themselves are perfect, but that they are summoned to a life of continual repentance. They are caught up in an apocalyptic transition effected by Christ’s resurrection, a transition from the old eon to the new. Their task is to become ever and again the saints that they already are in Christ.

It should be noted that the status of being “in Christ” as both a “mystical” and an “apocalyptic” condition includes public practices, even though it is not constituted by them. Although it cannot be reduced to a mode of private inwardness, neither can it be grasped merely through the public/private distinction. As a mystical and spiritual matter, it can only be apprehended by faith, transcending anything observable by sight. As something apocalyptic, on the other hand, it is destined to be revealed in glory at the end of all things. Until that day it will remain revealed to faith in the midst of its hiddenness and hidden in the midst of its revelation.

4. Although the word “saint” also means being “set apart” for tasks of worship and witness, its connection with the phrase “in Christ” seems here to suggest a different primary, more “ontic,” determination: actual holiness before God (coram Deo).
5. For a different view see Kelsey, Eccentric Existence, 727–33.
with the bishops and deacons—Rudiments of organization within the nascent community come to light with Paul's reference to “bishops and deacons,” a phrase as intriguing as it is inconclusive. “Bishops” or “overseers” (in the plural) would most likely have been responsible for the tasks of teaching and worship. If so, they would have been expected to instruct this predominantly Gentile church not only in the gospel of the apostolic faith but also, if possible, in the unfamiliar Hebrew scriptures, apart from which the gospel would be unintelligible, concerning as they did the Savior of the world, who was also the Jews’ crucified Messiah.

Presumably the “bishops” (episkopoi) would have been responsible for leading worship, and thus for presiding at baptism and the Eucharist. “Deacons” (diakonoi) would perhaps have been responsible, as in Acts, to care for the sick and needy. It cannot be ruled out, as intimated later in the letter, that women may have served in these “offices” at that time.

An emerging “church order” seems to be implicit. It apparently runs from the apostle to his coworker Timothy (both as “servants” or “slaves”), to “bishops and deacons,” and finally to the “saints.” “Egalitarian” and “hierarchical” elements would both seem to be in play, but at this distance they can hardly be sorted out.

At least two further points seem worthy of note. First, in marked contrast to his other letters, Paul does not immediately identify himself as an “apostle.” It would seem that his apostolic authority—so contested elsewhere throughout his ministry—is simply not an issue here. The church at Philippi is a community of his loyal supporters, on whose collaboration he could always count.

Second, we may wonder why “bishops and deacons” are singled out for special mention at the beginning, again in contrast to other letters. Since Paul is concerned about simmering problems of disunity at Philippi, perhaps these officeholders would be expected to play a role in straightening things out.

1:2 from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ—It is not always recognized that Paul’s apostolic benedictions, like this one (apo theou patros hêmôn...)

6. Regarding bishops and deacons, Chadwick writes, “Although one cannot be sure just what functions the Philippian bishops and deacons had, the subsequent development suggests that the deacons helped on the administrative side, while the spiritual leadership of the community would be in the hands of the ‘bishops’ with pastoral oversight, subject to Paul himself.” Would Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2–3) perhaps have been numbered among the “bishops,” or the “deacons,” or neither? See Chadwick, “Episcopacy,” 11.

7. “The official title of Apostle is omitted here, as in the Epistles to the Thessalonians. In writing to the Macedonian Churches, with which his relations were so close and affectionate, St. Paul would feel an appeal to his authority to be unnecessary,” Lightfoot, Philippians, 79.

8. In the comments that follow I first discuss the theological ascription in the latter part of 1:2 before turning to what this ascription provides the foundation for: the blessings Paul invokes in the first part of 1:2.
kai kyriou Iēsou Christou), seem to display an incipient trinitarian structure. In later tradition a typical literary form would run: “from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit.” This form sheds interesting light on the benediction as formulated here.

First, in contrast to the “from/through” structure that would later become more conventional, what appears here is essentially a structure of “from/from.” Because “the Lord Jesus Christ” is placed in apposition to “God our Father,” the preposition “from” (apo), though appearing only once, would seem to apply equally to both referents. “God our Father” and “the Lord Jesus Christ” are invoked as the twofold source of “grace and peace.”

It does not follow, however, that they would each need to be the source in the same way. If “God our Father” is understood as the absolute origin of “grace and peace,” then “the Lord Jesus Christ” can be seen as the Mediator through whom “grace and peace” are imparted. In any case, by placing the two in what might be called an apposition of origin, with respect to grace and peace, a certain coequality between them is implied. The deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, as suggested by the word “Lord” (kyrios), emerges more than once in the letter.

Second, a veiled reference to the Holy Spirit may perhaps be discerned under the aspect of “grace and peace.” In Paul, the Spirit is regularly associated with “peace” (e.g., Gal. 5:22) as well as with God’s “gifts” (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:4). The Holy Spirit is at once “object” and “subject,” the gift as well as the giver of gifts. A fully candid trinitarian expression might thus affirm that “grace and peace” are given from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit. In this light the typical Pauline benedictions, as evidenced here, may be regarded as precursors of later and more explicit trinitarian formulations. It is finally only in and by the Spirit that grace and peace are imparted from the Father through the Son to the community.\(^9\)

9. From the standpoint of later tradition, the idea that grace implies the Holy Spirit would be a natural one, as may be seen, for example, in Edwards: “Grace in the soul is the Holy Ghost acting in the soul.” Edwards, “Charity and Its Fruits,” in Works of Jonathan Edwards, 8:332.

10. Today there is a greater openness than there was a generation ago in New Testament scholarship to the kind of ecclesial reading I am attempting. “To interpret the Bible in light of the doctrine of the Trinity,” writes C. Kavin Rowe, “does not, therefore, distort its basic content but penetrates to its core with respect to the reality of the divine identity, the living God outside of the text known truly by Israel and fully in Jesus Christ. Such interpretative liberty does not entail a dismissal of the original sense of the text but instead seeks to illuminate the full breadth of ontological reality about which the biblical text, Old and New Testament together, speaks in its entirety.” Rowe, “Biblical Pressure,” 311–12. Throughout this commentary I do not argue that such a reading is entirely necessary, but only that it is possible and fitting, and therefore not illicit for the Christian community as grounded in the Nicene faith.
Grace to you and peace—“Grace” (*charis*) is therefore not so much an impersonal spiritual power as it is the powerful spiritual presence of a person. It is Christ’s presence to us as “a gift.” Athanasius once remarked that the Spirit is always in the Son even as the Son is always in the Father, so that the three are inseparable. Elsewhere he made it clear that the reverse is also true, so that the Son is always in the Spirit while the Father is always in the Son. Therefore, none of them is to be had without the others. If so, we may infer that “grace” is always finally the personal presence of the Son in the power of the Spirit. Or we may say that “grace” is always the gift of the Spirit proceeding from the Father through the Son. Related turns of phrase would also be permissible, each with its own nuance. It would be a mistake (not uncommon) to suppose that the use of one particular idiom automatically excludes others. A directly Christocentric idiom, for example, should not be taken as excluding a more trinitarian or a more pneumatological formulation, and so on.

“Grace” may thus be said to be effectual only insofar as it is Christocentric, trinitarian, and personal. At the same time the spiritual power of grace must be seen against an apocalyptic background. The ascended Christ is never present in the Spirit except in the disruptive power of Christ’s own resurrection (resurrection being an apocalyptic event). The presence of Christ by grace is God’s contradiction of sin and death. The once-for-all cross of Christ, where God’s protest against sin, evil, and death was carried out, becomes effectual in the present by the apocalypse of grace—in the Word and through the Spirit. “For the crucifixion of Christ,” writes J. Louis Martyn, “proves to be the centerpiece in God’s war on our behalf, the event of his powerful invading grace, in no way contingent on the fulfilling of a single presupposition from our side. . . . On the contrary, the crucifixion is God’s revelation of that gift of grace that, not assuming or presupposing faith, calls faith into existence.”

Grace always involves an “in spite of” structure. It comes again and again to deliver the faithful from sin and death. It comes, that is, to deliver sinners from what they would otherwise deserve. It is not merely, as is sometimes said, that grace is undeserved. Of course it is undeserved; but more to the point, it is contrary to what is actually deserved. Grace brings mercy and life instead of condemnation and death. Therefore it is always unsettling and new.

“Peace” is also finally an apocalyptic concept. It cannot be separated from conflict. Peace with God means conflict with the world, even as peace with the world means conflict with God. The peace that passes all understanding is a peace

that remains restless until the end. It is a peace that opposes death and the things that make for death. It is a peace that enters into death and in the midst of death perseveres. It is a peace that has the wisdom to change what can be changed while refusing to accept the things that cannot be changed (pace Reinhold Niebuhr). It seeks instead to oppose the unacceptable in the mode of a revolutionary patience. It is a peace that transcends every affliction. It is not such a peace as the world gives, nor a serenity indistinguishable from weak resignation. It is a peace that embraces the cross, yet is never without a lively hope. It is the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead.

Grounded in the apocalypse of grace, peace necessarily takes its bearings from the end of all things. In the time between the times, grace creates possibilities where there are no possibilities, so that the way of peace might be adopted in witness to Christ, who is himself the death of death, the hope of the poor, the liberation of the afflicted, and the expiation of all our sins. In short, what the apocalypse of grace effects is a radical peace—and this is the apostolic benediction—that is militant, forward looking, and imperturbable as sent by the Father through the Son and in the Spirit.

Note finally that the order is “grace and peace,” not “peace and grace.” It is not so much peace that leads to grace as grace that issues in peace. Peace arises from grace, even as grace finds its fulfillment in peace. Although peace may include a sense of inner harmony, it is primarily a matter of reconciling the estranged—not only vertically (between God and sinners) but also horizontally (between male and female, slave and free, Jew and Greek). The apocalypse of grace means that our warfare is ended, while the apocalypse of peace brings the promise of shalom—of well-being, justice, security, and blessing—not just inwardly but for all things. What comes initially to the community and to the believer in the community—grace and peace—is destined to embrace the whole world.

13 I thank my God—If prayer is the chief act of the Christian life, as Calvin believed, then giving thanks belongs to the chief acts of prayer. Although Paul speaks to the Philippians about God, he speaks all the more to God about the Philippians. He rejoices that they are committed to “active partnership” (koinonia) with him in the gospel. This koinonia is perhaps for the apostle a gift than which no greater can be conceived. The source of this gift is from above. While the Philippians are praised, all thanks is returned to God. Paul wants them to know that they are constantly remembered (“in all my remembrance of you,” epi pasē tē mneia hymōn, 1:3), that

12. “Paul felt closer to the Philippians than to any other church. . . . Philippians has the longest thanksgiving section of all the Pauline letters (1:3–11).” Schnelle, Apostle Paul, 570.
not one of them is excluded (“for you all,” *hyper pantón hymōn*, 1:4), and that he values their friendship (“your partnership,” *epi tē koinōnia*, 1:5) beyond measure.\(^\text{13}\)

1:4 making my prayer with joy—Paul makes it a point to stress that his prayers are offered not in sorrow but in joy (*charas*). There is reason to believe not only that he himself is living *in extremis* but also that the Philippians are in dire straits. The apostle’s note of joy in the midst of suffering, so prominent in this letter, finds its first expression here.

The joy of which Paul writes, and which he exhibits by his manner of life as well as by his prayer, is inseparable in his mind from the *koinōnia* he has just mentioned. Fellowship with the Philippians in and through Christ, and for the sake of Christ as clothed in the gospel, greatly sustains Paul in the midst of his trials. Joy, fellowship, and perseverance emerge as themes central to the letter.

For Paul, “joy” is a spiritual concept with vertical and horizontal elements. Joy arises, according to Aquinas, from love. It occurs when the person who is loved is present, or else when something good for that person comes to pass. Sorrow, on the other hand, arises from the absence of the beloved person, or else when that person undergoes some form of deprivation or harm.\(^\text{14}\)

The joy of loving God, Aquinas continues, arises not only from God’s intrinsic goodness but also from his presence to the faithful and their presence to him. They are present to one another in love: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16). This love is accompanied by joy. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11). The mutual presence of God and the faithful to each other in love (*koinōnia*) brings joy.

A similar pattern exists in the case of joy at the more horizontal or mundane level. Especially when the love is spiritual, as grounded in grace through faith, joy again arises from the mutual presence of each to the other. The joy of loving God carries over into joy among the faithful, who not only love one another but also, in and through one another, love God.

Joy is often expressed in the Bible through the imagery of bride and bridegroom.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I will rejoice greatly in the LORD,} \\
\text{My soul will exult in my God;} \\
\text{For He has clothed me with garments of salvation,}
\end{align*}
\]


He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness,  
As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isa. 61:10 NASB)

As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:5)

As mediated through Christ, the mutuality of love, at both the horizontal and the vertical levels, enables Paul to pray with joy in the midst of affliction.  

1:5 because of your partnership in the gospel—Joy is therefore doubly inseparable from koinōnia. Koinōnia with God through prayer is inseparable from koinōnia with coworkers in the gospel. Koinōnia, we may note, is a rich term whose semantic range cannot be captured in a single English word. At the lower end it means fellowship, which connotes some sort of alliance, camaraderie, and common interests. Beyond that, and more significantly, it can mean companionship and help, including economic assistance. At the high end, for Paul and the whole apostolic tradition, it means spiritual oneness and loving communion, even finally a kind of spiritual or “mystical” bond of mutual indwelling (Rom. 12:5), as suggested by the phrase “in Christ.”

The high form of koinōnia as “communion” is grounded in union with Christ while spilling over to embrace all those who know and love him by faith—the totus Christus, Christ in and with his people. In the New Testament, communion can be conveyed as mutual indwelling simply by the preposition “in.” “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14:20, italics added). It also has eucharistic implications. “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in you” (John 6:56). Communion knits the faithful together into one body. “We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom. 12:5).  

Koinōnia exists eternally in the Holy Trinity as the mutual indwelling (or perichoresis) of the three divine “persons” in love. It is a matter of mutual giving and receiving—of self-giving and receiving in love. It is mediated by Christ through the Spirit to the faithful by means of word and sacrament. Koinōnia at  

15. Paul elsewhere also places joy in relation to suffering—for example, when writing to the Thessalonians. You welcomed the gospel, he reminds them, “in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (en thlipsei pollē meta charas pneumatos hagiou) (1 Thess. 1:6). The affliction of the end times is overridden by the joy of the promised future in Christ.

16. Cf. Cranmer’s great eucharistic “Prayer of Humble Access” as found in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer: “Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.” Book of Common Prayer, 337.
the deepest level stands for ultimate reality itself. It is the beginning and end of all things. Joy arises from *koinōnia*, in its various forms, because of the divine exuberance at the heart of the Holy Trinity.

From the standpoint of later tradition, this is the larger theological background for the term as it comes to expression in this verse. Paul gives thanks for the Philippians in his prayers, because they share a “fellowship” or “partnership” (*koinōnia*) in the gospel. “Here, as the context shows,” writes J. B. Lightfoot, “it [*koinōnia*] denotes cooperation in the widest sense—their participation with the Apostle, whether in sympathy or in suffering or in active labor or in any other way.” Their mutual fellowship in attesting the gospel is a benefit that no suffering can diminish.

Note that by this use of *koinōnia* Paul may also be alluding to more than just their common vocation. He is perhaps also giving thanks to the Philippians for their repeated gifts to him of material aid. For Paul *koinōnia* can assume an almost sacramental aspect when embodied in the gift of money (2 Cor. 8:4; 9:14). This theme reappears at the end of the letter (Phil. 4:10–19).

**From the first day until now**—Paul commends the Philippians for their perseverance in remaining true to Christ and the gospel. They have not wavered “from the first day until now” (*apo tēs protēs hēmeras achri tou nun*). Their loyalty to Paul, to whom they owed much, remains a source of encouragement to him through all his hardships and afflictions. What Paul is commending is the “perseverance of the saints” as a communal, not just an individual, good.

“Perseverance” (*hypomonē*) is not a word found here, though what it stands for is being commended. It is a specifically biblical virtue that may be usefully compared to the classical virtue of “courage” (*andreia*) (cf. Rom. 5:4). For Aristotle, courage represents the golden mean between cowardice (a deficit of courage) and recklessness (an excess of courage), though it is closer to being reckless. It implies valor, bravery, and (notably) trusting in one’s own strength. “Physical courage,” or acting fearlessly despite pain, danger, or the threat of death, is distinguished from “moral courage,” which means acting rightly despite opposition, shame, or discouragement.

17. From this perspective, the “ultimate reality” of God pertains not to an abstract “being itself,” as some have argued, but rather to a concrete “being in communion,” loving communion, as exemplified by the Holy Trinity. The Trinity can be described as *autokoinōnia*, or Communion itself. *Koinōnia*, in the inner life of God, is the beginning and end of all things.


19. “Their almsgiving was a signal instance of this cooperation [*koinōnia*], and seems to have been foremost in the Apostle’s mind.” Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 81.

By contrast, and regardless of any overlaps, for Paul as for all of scripture, the good represented by “perseverance” is oriented not toward human self-reliance but toward God. Hypomonē is a profoundly theocentric (and in that sense “eccentric”) virtue (or better, gift). Like koinōnia, it has no single translation in the English Bible. It is commonly rendered as “patience,” “endurance,” and “waiting.”

Hypomonē essentially means waiting on God, crying out to God in distress, trusting in God’s promises, and not ceasing to hope in God for deliverance despite all adversity regardless of how severe. Among its biblical exemplars are Joseph languishing in prison, Job being afflicted in the land of Uz, and Jesus dying in agony on the cross. Hypomonē means the confidence of being sustained and the hope of being delivered, not by one’s own resources or virtues but by the intervention of divine grace. “Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:9, italics added; note the present tense).

The ideas of joy, koinōnia, and hypomonē are closely linked in Paul’s mind. While the term koinōnia is used in this verse for “active partnership” in the gospel, it pertains also (if only implicitly) to prayer as Paul’s communion with God. Paul is filled with thanks and joy toward God for his koinōnia with the Philippians, and theirs with him. Koinōnia means their joint participation in the same benefits (salvation), the same mission (proclamation of the gospel), and the same sufferings (persecution). The term hypomonē, while not appearing here (or anywhere in this letter), is clearly implied by the object of Paul’s thanksgiving—namely, the gift of the Philippians’ steadfast partnership with him, “from the first day until now,” in evangelical fellowship and joy despite all adversity and suffering.

And I am sure—This verse contains a promise that Paul may have formulated in light of a specific need. Signs of anxiety among the Philippians seem to seep through the edges at various points in the letter. It seems that they are suffering for their convictions, perhaps not so much from direct Roman persecution (though that cannot be ruled out) as from various forms of social ostracism and hostility. Their break with established social networks and cultural-religious bonds may have plunged them into serious economic hardship. Doubts about God’s grace have apparently entered the community, and defections are perhaps not unknown.

21. In Rom. 15:5 God is described as “the God of patience and comfort” (ho de theos tēs hypomonēs kai tēs paraklēseōs).
22. Literally, “having trusted in God, the one raising the dead” (pepoithotes . . . epi tō theō tō egeironti tous nekrous). The phrase tō egeironti is, remarkably, a present participle in the active voice.
If so, then Paul is encouraging them to live above their circumstances. His attention shifts from their perseverance to its objective ground, from their constancy to its future hope. Paul does not overpromise what they can expect, nor does he scale down the gospel to fit the circumstances. He simply appeals to the faithfulness of God.

The apostle is at least sure of one thing: the faithful should look on their hardships in light of the gospel, not the other way around. This policy is the benchmark of his evangelical realism. It is not their hardships that contradict the gospel, he believes, but the gospel that contradicts their hardships. It is not sin, evil, and death that will sway the future, nor their suffering from shunning, slander, and want.23

will bring it to completion—The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has triumphed over death and the things that make for death. The promise of the gospel is not that the faithful will be spared hardships but that they will be sustained in the midst of their afflictions. Adversity is not a sign that the faithful have been abandoned by God. It serves rather to remind them that Christ’s resurrection is greater than any adversity, and that the way of the cross is the common lot of his followers.

Above all, God will not abandon the work of his hands. Though his ways may at times be obscure, they are grounded in resurrection hope. The work of salvation that God has begun in the faithful (en hynmin, plural) will be completed "at the day of Jesus Christ" (an implicitly apocalyptic concept), and therefore to all eternity.24

This verse is sometimes thought to apply not so much to economic and social hardship as to feelings of discouragement arising from a sense of failure. These might be doubts that can afflict someone who has committed a grave moral wrong, someone who has failed despite much effort to overcome a besetting sin, or someone who has simply not made the hoped-for progress in spiritual life. Or again, there may be anxieties that are felt about a loved one—by a believer, for example, about a child who seems to have drifted away, or about any similar circumstance.

The pastoral care offered by this verse is much the same in any such cases. Look not to yourself and your failures, to the failings of another, or to any outward

23. The sufferings of the community at Philippi apparently “sprang,” writes Peter Oakes, “from a variety of primary causes: principally abandonment of pagan worship, also suspicion of secretive associations, suspicion of [perceived] Jewish activities, and attempts at evangelism. . . . For almost every group [in the church] the most serious long-term suffering seems likely to have been economic.” Oakes, Philippians, 91, 96.

24. "Divinely inspired impulses and actions in the Christian life confirm God's faithfulness to God’s intent to finish God's salvific purposes begun in believers." Gundry Volf, Paul and Perseverance, 270.
afflictions. Anyone who concentrates on his own life or that of another is bound to be stricken at some point with anxieties, as Luther well knew. It is as if Paul were saying, “However great your sins may be, God is greater than your sins, even as he is greater than your afflictions. Your hope should rest never in yourselves but in God. Despite all your failures and weaknesses, or all your adversities and disappointments, the God who has begun a good work in you can be trusted to bring it to completion. All other ground is sinking sand.” What Paul says in another connection would apply here as well: “What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means!” (Rom. 3:3–4).

_The day of Jesus Christ_—Note again that the day of completion is described as “the day of Jesus Christ” (ἡμέρας Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ). Three things seem to follow.

First, the ultimate goal Paul writes of is not finally to be found, and therefore not to be sought, under the conditions of this life. The faithful are not to expect perfection, nor perhaps even “progressive sanctification,” should there be such a thing. They are called to cling solely to God, in life and in death. Grace comes precisely to lost sinners. Thérèse of Lisieux writes, “In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works. All our righteousness is blemished in your eyes. I wish, then, to be clothed in your own righteousness and to receive from your love the eternal possession of yourself.”

Second, “the day of Jesus Christ” points toward his return in glory, and so not merely to the day of one’s death. The good work begun in the faithful stands under the sign of resurrection hope.

Finally, it cannot be insignificant that where the Old Testament refers to Yahweh—“the day of the Lord”—Paul re-mints the phrase christologically to read “the day of Jesus Christ.” The lordship of Yahweh is connected with Christ himself. Christ is the hope of the afflicted, the comforter of the discouraged, and the deliverer of the lost. He is not just the source but the content of hope. The faithful are to look not to themselves but to him who is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25).

_It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel._

_7It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel._

_8For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus._

_9And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,_

_10so that you may_ 25. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, _Story of a Soul_, 435.
approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,
filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the
glory and praise of God.

It is right for me to feel this way—The koinōnia theme returns because
Paul’s heart is at least as compendious as his mind. To have an “active partnership” (koinōnia) in the gospel (1:3), to pray to God with thanksgiving and joy (1:3–4), to have a good work begun in one’s community (and in oneself) by God (1:6), to be “partakers” (synkoinōnous) with the apostle in grace (1:7)—these are all aspects of what it means to be “in Christ Jesus” (1:1). They are variations on a theme. Paul’s relationship to the Philippians, and theirs to him, is mediated through their common bond of union with Christ (participatio Christi).

because I hold you in my heart—Paul feels this bond with emotional intensity. He holds the Philippians “in his heart” (en tē kardia), every one of them without exception (“you all,” pantōn hymōn). The bond the Philippians enjoy with Christ is the same bond that joins them to Paul as well as to one another. They are mutual partakers of one grace (synkoinōnous . . . tēs charitos), which is Christ’s personal intervention for them in the Spirit. That is precisely the spiritual bond that makes the depth of Paul’s affection so fitting (“it is right for me to feel this way,” kathōs estin dikaios emoi touto phronein). He holds the Philippians in his heart, as he also does the Corinthians (2 Cor. 7:3), knowing that they will finally live together and die together, for they are all one body in Christ.

in my imprisonment—It is now disclosed to the reader what the Philippians themselves must have already known—namely, that Paul writes as one imprisoned and in chains. The imprisonment is most likely in Rome, where the trial Paul faces could mean death. The apostle’s joy in the midst of incarceration offers a model of the Christian life for the Philippians. He seeks to encourage them, to relieve their anxieties about him, putting all things into spiritual perspective.

and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel—Whether in prison or in the courtroom, whether in chains or in freedom, Paul strives to do one thing above all else. He strives to advance the gospel. By the Word and in the Spirit, Paul strives to let Christ reveal himself to the world through his apostleship.

for you are all partakers with me of grace—The koinōnia of the Philippians with Paul in grace (synkoinōnous), their oneness with him, extends also to his

26. Rome seems to be the best guess. For reasons for this, consult the standard commentaries, such as those by Fee and Bockmuehl. See also my comment below on 4:22.
defense and confirmation of the gospel, even as it extends to his imprisonment. In joy and affliction, in vocation and perseverance, they are called to see themselves as one body in communion.

1:8 how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus—Paul endeavors to put first things first, but not at the expense of his love for the Philippians. Not only are they in his heart; they are loved by him with “the affection of Christ Jesus” (en splanchnois Christou Iēsou), an affection given from above.27 The implication is clear. Christ himself loves the Philippians in and through Paul, even as Paul loves them in and through Christ.28 No deeper affection can be imagined. The two loves—Paul’s and Christ’s—in their abiding distinction are one. Paul desires that the joy he feels in Christ will be completed by his reunion with his friends. Facing trial and perhaps imminent death, he can state, “I yearn for you with all the affection of Christ Jesus.”

1:9 And it is my prayer—Paul prays for the Philippians as whole persons—heart, hand, and mind. The heart in particular is the seat of faith, involving not just the affections but also all spiritual knowledge and discernment. In practice, the heart thus involves perseverance (hypomonē) (cf. 1:5) and sincerity (eilikrines) (cf. 1:10).

that your love may abound . . . , with knowledge—Paul knows that love (agapē) and knowledge (epignōsis) cannot be separated. Knowledge without love can be contentious, while love without knowledge can be naïve. Above all, God cannot be known without also being worshiped and loved. Nor can he be loved and worshiped without also being truly known. That is one reason, perhaps the deepest, why revelation is always necessary. Without the generosity of his self-revelation, God can be neither known nor loved nor worshiped aright.

God is the Lord of his own self-giving in love and of his own self-disclosure in knowledge—and just so is he the source of the world’s salvation in Christ. Ultimately, therefore, there can be no such thing as a neutral knowledge of God detached from love (as in some philosophical theologies), nor a true love of God apart from knowledge (as in some “spiritualities”). A God not worshiped with love in true knowledge is no God at all.

abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment—The “more and more” passages in Paul (mallon kai mallon) are a sign that the communities

27. J. B. Lightfoot paraphrases this part of 1:8 as follows: “Did I speak of having you in my own heart? I should rather have said that in the heart of Christ Jesus I long for you.” He comments, “A powerful metaphor describing perfect union.” Lightfoot, Philippians, 83.
to whom he writes require encouragement more than correction. He prays that love among the Philippians—for God and for one another—will increasingly abound. Where love abounds, knowledge (epignōsis) and all discernment (pasē aisthēsei) will tend toward their proper proportions. They will bear fruit in sound judgment and right action. Whatever is excellent will be recognized and approved, while deceiving appearances will be unmasked and exposed. Perhaps not least, discord and rivalry among the faithful will be held at bay.29 Love cannot flourish with knowledge and all discernment where the atmosphere is poisoned by discord and rivalry.

1:10 approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless—The church fathers tended to think that “approve what is excellent” (to dokimazein . . . ta diapheronta, “to discern what needs to be distinguished”) pertains to distinguishing heresy from true doctrine, while being “pure and blameless” (eilikrineis kai aproskopoi) concerns the kind of practices that flow from true beliefs. Modern interpreters, on the other hand, usually read “approve what is excellent” as a matter of wisdom in spiritual or moral discernment. Being “pure and blameless” would then mean putting that discernment into practice. Either way, sound judgment is essential to sincere dispositions (eilikrineis) and worthy deeds (aproskopoi).

for the day of Christ—Resurrection hope is oriented toward the “day of Christ” (eis hēmeran Christou), and for Paul all practices need to be gauged accordingly. On that day the divine judgment of grace will be fulfilled. Only what is “pure and blameless”—or authentic and true—will survive, only the “gold, silver, and precious stones.” All else—the “wood, hay, and straw”—will be destroyed as in a consuming fire (1 Cor. 3:12–13). Right practices for the faithful are not a matter of attaining salvation but a matter of receiving the reward earned in response to the salvation given as a free gift (1 Cor. 3:14–15).

1:11 filled with the fruit of righteousness—Paul does not pray that the Philippians will become righteous, for by the grace of Christ the “saints” are already righteous in God’s sight (cf. 1:1). He prays rather that they will bear “the fruit of righteousness” (karpon dikaiosynēs), fulfilling the gift of their calling, and so receive their appointed reward.30 The fruit of righteousness—the harvest of justice—is peace and the things that make for peace (Jas. 3:18). This fruit therefore comes “through Christ” and means being shaped in conformity to his image, in union with his person.

29. “If such love increases among the Philippian Christians, it will remove the threats to their unity of heart and purpose that arise from occasional clashes of personality and temperament.” Bruce, Philippians, 36.

30. “Righteousness by faith is intimately bound up with the life in Christ: it must in its very nature be fruitful; it is indeed the condition of bearing fruit.” Lightfoot, Philippians, 85.
and communion with him. The peace grounded in justice, and the justice that bears fruit in peace, will redound through Christ “to the glory and praise of God” (eis doxan kai epainon theou).

through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God—A later trinitarian formula is again perhaps anticipated, this time not in benediction but in intercession (1:9). Recall that the benediction (1:2) anticipated the formula “from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit.” Now in intercession (as seen in the prepositions dia and eis) the movement is implicitly reversed: “in the Spirit, through (dia) the Son, and to (eis) the Father.”

Reference to the Spirit remains as yet unexpressed. However, the abounding of love, the grace of knowledge and all discernment, the approval of what is excellent, the rejection of whatever mars it, the spiritual authenticity that withstands the fires of judgment, and the harvest of justice as manifest in peace—what are these if not fruits of the Spirit? In the Spirit and through the Son, such fruits glorify and praise the Father, their ultimate origin and source. Paul’s intercession for his beloved Philippians reflects a nascent trinitarian sensibility.

12 I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers and sisters, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

1:12 served to advance the gospel—The fact that God brings good out of evil does not make evil good. The Lord God bends evil to serve his purposes despite itself. In small ways and in large, in ways known and largely unknown, he compels sin, evil, and death to achieve his sovereign purposes of grace and peace. The great reversal from Good Friday to Easter is what grounds the promises of the gospel.

Unexpected deliverances, surprising turns of affairs, providential windfalls—these are echoes of the great reversal. They are portents of the world to come. They occur at times and places of God’s own choosing, not subject to our manipulations or control. They represent the divine cunning in history. While their nonoccurrence, when evil prospers, may sometimes overwhelm us with dismay, in the end everything stands or falls with the sign of the great reversal that points to the faithfulness of God—namely, the invincible sign of Easter Day.

32. Recall that Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress is a narrative depicting such themes.
The divine jujitsu, by which evil is used to defeat itself, finds expression in the imprisonment of Paul. What has happened to him is neither pleasant nor promising. Though he is an emissary of grace and peace, he is incarcerated as a threat to society. His mission as an itinerant preacher has ground to a halt. He is cut off from most of his friends while facing the possibility of an imminent death. The Philippians, we may imagine, are understandably distressed. Paul, however, fixes his eyes on the lodestar. The advance of the gospel is the entire meaning of his existence, and despite his imprisonment, that advancement has not ceased. Indeed, it has taken an unexpected twist that would have been scarcely imaginable.

1:13 throughout the whole imperial guard—We do not know exactly how the gospel has spread throughout “the whole imperial guard,” and so presumably into the imperial palace itself. Nor do we know exactly what it is that prompted most of the faithful in Rome to become more confident in the Lord (1:14). But we can well imagine. What else could have sparked these things but Paul’s astonishing and indefatigable spirit? He does not focus on his hapless circumstances but seizes the margin of freedom that remains.

my imprisonment is for Christ—Whether inside the prison or outside it, no one is left in doubt that Paul’s captivity is “for Christ.”  

1:14 much more bold to speak the word without fear—Paul’s boldness in speaking the word has inspired a renewed boldness in others. His fearlessness is not only attention-grabbing but contagious. Because of him, the word continues to advance like a spreading flame. That is what he wants his friends at Philippi to know. He wants them to be encouraged by the providential effects of his imprisonment.

Another New Testament term for “boldness,” parrêsia, though not used here, conveys much the same sense of “boldness in speaking the word” (e.g., Acts 4:13, 29, 31). It stands in interesting juxtaposition to the term hypomonē. The persistent cry for deliverance from suffering (hypomonē) represents much the same boldness and confidence in relation to God as proclaiming the gospel without fear (parrêsia) represents in relation to others. While hypomonē pertains more to the vertical dimension, and parrêsia to the horizontal, both are expressions of trust in the transcendent power that governs all things.

33. “It had now become clear that Paul was a prisoner, not for any crime he committed, political or otherwise, but simply because he was a Christian.” Hawthorne, Philippians, 34 (slightly modified).