

## A Heavenly Outcome

**Philippians 3:17-21**  
**November 6, 2022**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
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Edmond MacDonald wrote that when God wants an important thing done in this world or a wrong righted, he goes about it in a very singular way. He doesn't release thunderbolts or stir up earthquakes. God simply has a tiny baby born, perhaps of a very humble home, perhaps of a very humble mother. And she puts it in the baby's mind, and then – God waits. "The great events of this world," says MacDonald, "are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts. The great events are babies, for each child comes with a message that God is not yet discouraged with humanity, but is still expecting goodwill to become incarnate in each human life."<sup>1</sup> "The great events of this world are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts. The great events are babies...."

That's an important thing to remember – to understand – as the world faces all kinds of battles, as we anticipate the results of this week's Midterm Elections, as we see the devastating effects of more than our share of earthshaking tragedies and troubles.

We need to remember that God is still at work setting all things right, and that he does this primarily through men and women, boys and girls and all people born of good character and called into service for something greater than themselves.

The Apostle Paul, in today's New Testament lesson, understands this – he understands that we are the first, best hope when it comes to how God will set things right. God used Paul to share and nurture the message of salvation and the lifestyle and values that arise from it. And so it is today – God uses us to share and nurture the message of salvation and the lifestyle and values that arise from it.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is an encouragement to them – and us – when it comes to living in a divisive time full of fighting and adversarial opposition. Philippi was a Roman province on the frontier of the empire, taken in battle against the Macedonians in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., The population was made up of veterans of the Roman army, who lived alongside the Greek landowners, merchants, peasants and slaves. Religiously, a large number of Greek and Roman gods were worshipped, along with the Roman emperor, Caesar, who was seen by many as their lord and savior, the one to bringing salvation and peace. And in walks Paul with some very different ideas about who to worship, how to live and where to put our hope and trust.

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<sup>1</sup> Marian Wright Edelman, "Standing Up for Children," chapter 3 of Paul Rogat Loeb, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While* (Basic Books, 2003).

Writing to them from a Roman prison nearly 10 years after his first visit, Paul reminds them of what he taught them and showed them about being a faithful Christian. “Brothers and sisters,” he says, “join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ...” People living as enemies of the cross of Christ – that’s pretty scary. And yet, I think we see that in our world today. It used to be that society put forward good role models to follow, to imitate, as Paul puts it. And of course, they are still there. But most of the good role models get lost in the crowd. Social media has made it that the most outrageous and divisive people stand out. And rather than turning away from them or asking them to step aside, great numbers of people are jumping on the bandwagon, following and imitating their negative behavior.

Looking at Biblical times, we might think it’s terrible that people worshipped the Roman emperor as a type of god, but look at who people are putting their hope in today, who they trust above all else. Look at who people are imitating. It sure isn’t the Apostle Paul, or Jesus, or even just the decent, moral people in their lives.

Parents really have to struggle these days to instill good values and moral character in their children. People have to be so careful about what they read on social media, what they believe and act upon. Even the best of our government representatives can’t seem to cut through all the noise and hate and misdirection in their attempt to get things done. As Paul says, “... Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them,” he says, “and now I tell you even with tears.” Paul is concerned that the church he planted in Philippi might crumble under the weight of a misguided political and social system.

Paul is sitting in prison weeping over the state of the world and all the evil, misguided forces that have taken hold of people, leading them to live as if they were enemies of Christ. “Their end is destruction,” says Paul, and this grieves him, “their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.”

Paul is distraught that things have come to this – that otherwise good people are being led astray by evil and misguided ways, that people are focusing only on their bellies – their vane, gluttonous desires. He sees people taking pride in shameful behavior, setting their minds on earthly things rather than all that Christ has to offer – all the peace and love and abundance, the care and compassion and fellowship, the service and blessings that really makes a difference in this world.

Paul grieves over this, and so do we, wondering who on earth should we follow and support. Take for example the little boy at recess in the sandbox making buildings out of sand on election day. His teacher comes by and asks what he’s making.

“This is the U.S. Capital,” he says. “See, this building here is where Congress meets. Impressed with his knowledge and patriotism, the teacher asks, “And where is the congressman?” “Oh,” says the boy, “I don’t have enough dirt for a congressman.”

Yes, we, like Paul, grieve over the state of our world today and the failure of our elected leaders to make a difference. “But,” says Paul, “our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.” Paul is telling us to rise above these earthly struggles and worries and put our hope and trust in the Lord.

This week, Americans go to the polls to elect men and women to Congress and other offices. The outcome will shape the future of this country. And depending on who you’re voting for and who the winners are, you could be very disappointed by the outcome. Or if your party comes out on top, you could be somewhat hopeful. I doubt, however, that anyone is going to be overly optimistic, regardless of the outcome.

But as Christians, we can be exceedingly optimistic about the outcome of the cross of Jesus Christ. Christ alone is our Lord and Savior, able to make all things subject to himself, including our elected leaders, including our wayward friends and family members, including the social systems that regulate and serve humanity.

More important than who gets elected this week is who you decide to follow and trust. And who follows and trusts you. “... Live according to the example you have in us,” says Paul, pointing to the cross of Jesus.

If we put our trust in the Lord, live according to the manner and teachings of Jesus, support and promote others who do the same, and guide and nurture those coming up after us, then we don’t have to worry about the future of this world. God has that already worked out.

And all he desires of us is that we come alongside Jesus and one another to bring about the peace and prosperity he desires for all people. Now that would be a heavenly outcome. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

See in us, O God our Father, what you love in your Son. Remind us that our true citizenship is in Heaven, and that it does not rest upon political affiliation and election outcomes, but rather on the sacrifice of the Cross. Help those who serve our country do so with honor and decency. Guide them in their decision-making that they would be instruments of your blessing and protection over this nation we love.

We thank you, Lord, for the men and women of our military, those serving now and those who served in years past. We thank you for those who, in your Spirit, serve in homes, workplaces, schools, churches and out in the community.

Lord God, we are fully aware that we do not live in a perfect world. Open our eyes to what can be, and let us be a people of faithful action. May we ourselves be your tools for building up the kingdom of God, a heavenly kingdom of hope and peace, justice and prosperity for all.

We pray, too, for those who need a special measure of hope and peace this day, those dealing with illness, those struggling with heavy burdens, those feeling lost and looking for a way forward. We pray all this in the name of the one who showed us the way, who reveals to us what a life of love and faithfulness looks like, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**