

How to be Worth Remembering • Philipians 1:3

In the American Civil War there were 364,511 recorded deaths. That number is almost as many as the number of military deaths in World War II, although by the middle of the 20th century the population of our country was far greater. Therefore, the percentage of deaths in the Civil War was far more significant. There was hardly a family in the north or the south that did not have a father or a brother or a husband or a son die. Those losses were not easily forgotten.

Various southern states began a tradition of having one day each year when they would remember those from the Confederate army who had died. They called it Memorial Day, a day when they would set aside time to decorate the Confederate graves. Ironically, it was an officer in the Union army, John Logan, who picked up the idea and first declared May 30, 1868, as the day to remember the war dead and specifically to decorate the graves of those who had been part of the grand army of the republic.

The tradition expanded year by year and state by state. But, ironically, many southern states chose not to participate in what was perceived as an increasingly Union or northern holiday. In fact, to this day Alabama and Mississippi do not celebrate Memorial Day.

As the holiday evolved changes came to include the war dead from future wars, not just the Civil War dead. Eventually it became a day of memory not just for those who died in wars but also for civilians who had died. Even the date changed so that the official holiday became the last Monday of May.

Personally, I find myself touched by the memory of those who have given the ultimate human sacrifice for their country. Charleen and I have visited cemeteries around the world where America's war dead are buried. We've walked the long rows in the American cemetery outside Manila in the Philippines. We've spent time at Punchbowl Cemetery near Pearl Harbor where so many of the dates of death are the same. We've been to cemeteries along the East Coast of the United States, most notably Arlington National Cemetery, and spent time there reading the markers and wondering about the people. Our family has been to Fort Snelling on Memorial Day. After the public ceremonies ended we walked up and down the rows of markers, reading the names, the dates of birth and death and the branch of the service in which they had served. We won-

dered about their short lives, how they had lived and how they had died.

All this raises the question of what makes men and women memorable. Surely, we would not say it is primarily their deaths. I would hope we would say it is primarily their lives. And, if somehow it were possible for those whose bodies lie under the markers in these cemeteries around the world to come back, I am convinced that they would insist that they not be primarily remembered because of a bullet or a bomb that ended their days. They would far rather be remembered for who they were and what they did, the relationships they had or the words they spoke. Memories should be crafted far more out of life than out of death.

That brings us full circle to our own lives. At least sometimes we have wonder how we will be remembered. If we could attend our own funerals or read our own obituaries what would be said about us? How will we be remembered? Will we be worth remembering at all?

For the best of answers to these thought-provoking questions let's go to the first chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. There it describes the most memorable of Christians in the ancient Greek city of Philippi. It's a chapter that combines memory with gratitude.

It's true that there are those who are remembered without gratitude. In fact, there are some people long gone who are remembered with animosity if not with hatred. But that was certainly not true of these Philippians.

Candidly, I would choose to have people be grateful for my memory. I would like for their memory of me to contain thanksgiving.

The apostle writes in Philipians 1:1-11:

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together
with the overseers and deacons:*

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*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 Jesus Christ.*

Relate to other people in such a way that you're not wondering how they can contribute to your life but how you can contribute to their lives.

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.

Paul writes of two characteristics that made these Philippian Christians memorable. The first is that they shared together in a partnership. He writes in verse 3, “*I thank my God every time I remember you.*” But then he explains why he remembers them as he does: “. . . *because of your partnership in the gospel. . .*”

The English word here for “partnership” is translated from one of the few Greek words that some who have not studied Greek but have been part of the Christian community may have often heard. It is the Greek word *koinonia*. But it’s hard to translate a single word from one language into a single word of another language. *Koinonia* is more than just a single term and it’s more than just partnership. It means association or fellowship. It is sometimes translated as “communion”, friendship or close relationship.

Let me try to communicate what *koinonia* means, not from a Greek English lexicon but from an English dictionary, with the definition of what is a partner. Actually, five different definitions are given. A partner is an associate, sharer or participant. A partner is a husband or a wife. A partner may be defined in terms of games as one who plays with another or others against an opposing team. A partner may be defined in terms of the law as one of two or more associates as joint principles in carrying on any business with a view to joint profit. Or, a fifth definition, one that I had never heard before, is the nautical definition of a partner: One of the timbers forming a framework for an opening in a deck to strengthen it for the support of a mast.

I think the Apostle Paul would have agreed to all of these definitions because they all describe something of his relationship to the Philippians. You see, the idea behind all of this is that it is seldom a casual and brief acquaintance or a single event that greatly impacts another person’s life or that makes that person memorable in the lives of other individuals. Rather, it’s the sharing of life. It’s a partnership. It’s joining together in association, teamwork, bonding. It’s that kind of a relationship that shapes the life of another person and then leaves the other person with a lifelong memory filled with gratitude.

But, if the apostle Paul were here I think he would strenuously object to an inadequate secular definition of *koinonia* or even partnership. He would point out that he was very careful in the selection of his words, saying that his memory of the Philippians was as a partnership in the gospel. And it wasn’t just because they all spoke the same language or lived in the same day or had traveled to the same places or had other things in common. It was that they were all one in Jesus Christ. Their loyalty was to the same Savior, the same Lord and the same truth. It was for that reason that they had this partnership together, a common bond in the Savior whom they all acknowledged. The rest of the letter to the Philippians is loaded with practical examples of how that partnership was practiced.

At the time of the writing of these words St. Paul was a prisoner in Rome. Certainly there must have been those who thought that if he was in prison there must be good cause for him to be there. In those days prisons were much like prisons in many countries even to this day. It was necessary for family and friends to take care of the individual and personal needs of the prisoner. Paul says that he was in chains. Probably, at least at times, he was chained to a wall or had his hands or feet chained together. But, in all probability, he was chained to a Roman guard and the guards would change on a regular basis. So, day after day he had neither privacy nor provision. His needs were great.

The Philippians were so concerned about Paul that they selected one of their own, a man named Epaphroditus, and asked him to leave his job, his family, his church and his city of Philippi and make the long journey across the empire to Rome so that he could minister to the personal needs of their beloved friend and partner, Paul.

The letter explains that they prayed for him, hoped for him, wrote to him, provided for his physical needs and provided money. When there was bad news, they wept with him; when there was good news, they rejoiced with him. They shared a partnership.

All of this seems so terribly distant, though. How does this kind of *koinonia*, this partnership, make us memorable today? How is this relevant to where we are and what we do? There’s a sense in which I struggle to illustrate that, not so much because of a lack of examples but rather because the examples are so numerous. I know very well the stories of partnership in the gospel that the people of Wooddale Church could tell. They are not my stories to tell in public but I can tell you in general terms what they’re like. There are those in this community of faith who have rejoiced with ecstasy over wonderful gifts from God. There are others who have experienced pain that most of the rest of us cannot comprehend. I’ve heard those stories. I’ve rejoiced with those who have rejoiced.

Often I have people tell me of the response of other Christians to their news, both good and bad. Almost without exception they tell me that others seemed more excited than they were over good news. They are absolutely thrilled. And somehow that escalates the thrill. And when the stories are of deep pain and distress other Christians were understanding and sympathetic giving assurance of their prayers and their love. Again and again I have had people tell me that when they have gone through difficulties they have found others within the church who have traveled the same path. Others tell of men and women who say, "I've not experienced what you're going through, but I want you to know that I care and I love you. If there's anything I can do to help, I will." There are many stories of people who have prayed, supported, loved and helped in all kinds of ways. That's the way it's supposed to be.

If you would like to be remembered with gratitude, here are four practical suggestions. The first is to be a partner and not a loner. Get to know people. Share life with others, whether it's the triumphs or the difficulties.

A second suggestion is to be a giver, not a taker. Continually think in terms of what you can do for others rather than what they can do for you. Regularly look for the needs of others and try to meet them. Relate to other people in such a way that you're not wondering how they can contribute to your life but how you can contribute to their lives.

Next, be a sympathizer and not a critic. Imagine being in the other person's situation. Don't be critical of how that person got there but be understanding of that person's pain or pleasure. Wonder what it is like; try to imagine walking in her or his shoes.

Be an encourager, not a discourager. There are plenty of discouragers in the world but there is always a shortage of those who will encourage. That's one of the reasons the Apostle Paul so fondly remembered the Philippians and why he was so grateful for them. You see, Paul also had his times of discouragement. Maybe it's hard for us to imagine that. We sometimes think that the saints of the Bible were these perfect people who did not deal with the ordinary problems that we face. We make a mistake if we do that. We are wrong if we elevate Paul or others to a spirituality that simply was not true. We minimize their humanity in a way that simply is not accurate.

Understand that Paul was in jail. He was in chains. His life was in jeopardy. He was accused of a capital crime. He was appealing to Caesar. It was his last resort. And after reciting all of his woes, he writes to the Philippians in 1:18 and 19:

And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

Do you want to be remembered with gratitude? Then be like the Philippians. Be a partner to other Christians, someone who gives more than you take, sympathizes more than you criticize, encourages more than you discourage. Do these things and you will be loved and you will be remembered with gratitude.

There is a second characteristic of the gratefully-remembered Philippians. It is not only partnership but perseverance. Paul wrote about their "*partnership in the gospel from the first day until now . . .*"

The letter to the Philippians was written probably in AD 61. We estimate that Paul's first journey to Philippi was about a decade earlier, in AD 50, 51 or 52. That means that ten years had past. A lot had happened in that time. If you read Acts 16 you will find that the Philippian

church had a tumultuous beginning. When Paul and Silas first arrived in town there was no synagogue there. That was the usual place where they would begin their religious teaching. So they went out by a riverside where they found some God-fearers, Gentiles on the fringe of Judaism, praying. They presented the gospel and there were those who received Jesus Christ as Savior. But it wasn't long until the authorities put Paul and Silas into prison. They severely and illegally beat them.

Paul was a Roman citizen. It was clearly against the law to beat him; but they never bothered to ask his citizenship. They beat him almost to the point of taking his life. With his wounds still open and in chains and in the deepest dungeon he demonstrated the grace of God as he and Silas sang hymns together. It was a wonderful thing.

As they were singing an earthquake rocked the prison and the gates flew open. The jailer feared for his life if the prisoners escaped; but they didn't. The jailer and his family were added to the church as a result of those events and Paul and Silas' response to them.

But Paul and Silas were clearly not welcome in Philippi, so a short time later they left the town and moved elsewhere. Paul traveled broadly. He was shipwrecked. He was beaten on another occasion and left for dead. There are some who believe that he actually died and came back to life again. He was criticized. There were those who said he wasn't a very good missionary. Some claimed that he wasn't even really an apostle

There are plenty of discouragers in the world but there is always a shortage of those who will encourage.

and that he was simply pretending to be something he was not. Some of the deepest wounds were inflicted by those whom he loved the most. If you read the letters to the Corinthians you see that fellow Christians in the church at Corinth were most critical of him.

Then there was theological controversy which threatened to tear apart the first century church. Some said you have to work to become a Christian. Others claimed that you have to become a Jew first and then you can become a believer in Jesus Christ. Paul and others said, "That's not true. Everything is by the sheer grace of God, through Jesus Christ. When he died on the cross he accomplished our salvation. It is full and free, simply for the accepting." The church almost divided over that.

Yes, there were a lot of difficult times. But through all of them the Philippians stuck with him. They persevered. They maintained friendship, partnership, association, collegueship. Not that they always agreed with him. Not that Paul was easy to get along with; he was not. But they hung in there. They persevered. They prayed for him. They supported him. They remained faithful friends. So when he wrote that it was a joy just to think about them he knew what he was talking about. He was reflecting back over a long relationship of good times and bad when they were always there for him. He was grateful for every memory of them.

There's a powerful lesson here for us on impacting other peoples' lives. It's a reminder that it is seldom one single event that shapes another person. It's not a word that was spoken or one particular event. It's what takes place over years. In the same way that it takes a long time for an acorn to grow into an oak tree, so it is with a relationship that remembers with gratitude.

Parents who learn this lesson have the long optimistic view. They hang in there and wait for the day that may not come for decades when a son or daughter says: "Dad, Mom, thank you for believing in me when I was so unlovable. Thank you for praying for me and staying faithful to me." That's perseverance.

Husbands and wives need to have this long term view as well. Marriage is far more than romance, a wedding ceremony and fun. Both sides of the wedding vows come into play. There is worse as well as better, sickness as well as health, poverty as well as riches. Those who persevere find that the difficulties of life can become a bonding agent, a glue, for the partnership.

It is also a lesson for churches and for Christians. Churches have their ups and downs just as people have their ups and downs. Every church needs Philippian Christians who will remain faithful through both the good times and the bad times.

If you want to be worth remembering with gratitude here are a few suggestions to add to the list. Take the long view rather than the short view. Don't judge life and others by a single occurrence but rather trust God to be the God of change. Really believe that God is capable of the kind of miracles that will transform another person's life in the long run.

A second suggestion is don't give up until God gives up. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:6, I am "*confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*"

The third suggestion is to be an anchor rather than a piece of driftwood. A lot of us tend to flow with the currents of the day. We need anchors, fixed points. Those who will be our partners and will persevere are dependable and constant through all the changes in life.

All of this is simply to say "persevere" so that at a later date people may say of you what Paul said to the Philippians: "*I thank my God every time I remember you.*"

I conclude with a personal word because my experience with Wooddale Church has been an amazing parallel to what Paul wrote to the Philippian church. The people of Wooddale Church have been partners with me in every good sense of *koinonia*, partners in the gospel of Jesus Christ. They have persevered with me over the decades and I have benefited enormously from that perseverance. So, from personal experience I can say to the people of Wooddale Church, "*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every rime I remember you.*"

May God bless you and grant you that kind of relationship with the church of which you are a part.

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faimatters.fm
©Leith Anderson