DATE: **JANUARY 25, 2026**
SERIES: **FINISHING WELL**
MESSAGE: **THEMES THAT MATTER**
PASSAGE: **PHILIPPIANS 1:1-21**
SPEAKER: **BRYAN CLARK**

Running this race we call life, the sober in reality is, we're all gonna finish. That's not really the question. The question is, will we finish well? It's pretty hard to finish well, if you haven't run the race well. Encouraging part of that is it's not a matter of chance, it's a matter of choice. That's what we want to talk about this morning.

If you have a Bible, turn with me to Philippians chapter one. When you read through the Bible, study the Bible, preach the Bible, you start to notice over time, there's just themes that emerge throughout the Bible. So over the years, a lot of these themes have emerged. There are things that we've talked about. I've identified five of these, I've called them "themes that matter," that I want to talk about this morning. There's no significance in five other than just the constraints of time—could be a lot more than that. But I've also found five themes in the first chapter of Philippians, which helps us organize this a little bit, so it doesn't seem quite so random. So we're not going to do a typical exposition to the text. I just want to identify these themes, and that kind of launches this into a little conversation about each of them.

So chapter one, verse one:

> *1 Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus,*

That's not an unusual introduction. Paul uses this language often. It's easy just to read over it and keep going, but I want to stop and think about what he just said. The concept of a bond-slave was a very vivid imagery for both Paul and his readers. About a third of the Roman empire was made up of slaves. So this wasn't really, like, spiritual language, this was a very vivid imagery. And no one was confused. No one thought that the role of the master is to fulfill the agenda of the slave. It was very clear—he's the master, I'm the slave.

The 1st big theme you get from Genesis to Revelation is that obedience is the pathway to flourishing. Obedience is the pathway to flourishing. Clarity. He's the master, I'm the slave. We've often talked about Genesis chapters one, two, and three. And the reality is, as people made in the image of God, the great temptation all of us face is our desire to be our own God. I don't want to be the slave. I want to be the master of my own life. I wanna run the show. I want to call the shots.

I think the New Testament refers to this as the temptation all other temptations flow out of, this one central temptation. Who's gonna be the master? Me or Jesus? It is not an issue of, he's the master, so I need to do what I'm told or is gonna clobber me. That's not what it is. It's a deep belief in the goodness of God, and that his way is the right way that leads to the life my soul longs for, that obedience is the pathway to flourishing.

Let me tell you a little bit about how this has fleshed out in my own life. So I graduated from high school, went to Chicago to the Moody Bible Institute. Trevor already mentioned that in the video. Moody was a great school. I have a high respect for the school. I learned a lot. Once a year, they had an event called Founders Week, and it was probably the biggest event of the year. No classes, and

just lots of chapel services where they brought in the who's-who in the preaching world, the best of the best. So as Founders Week would approach, there was always a buzz on campus. Who's coming? They'll be on campus. This is before the internet and all that. So maybe these were well known radio preachers, but they'd be on campus. You get to see them, you see them preach in person, you get to meet them. So it's guys like Chuck Swindoll, John MacArthur, Stephen Olford, Warren Wiersbe, kind of the who's-who in the preaching world. And I remember as students, you couldn't help but think, "maybe." Maybe I could be the next great preacher. Maybe someday that could be me. I think probably with very sincere heart, could God use me like that? A little bit like a kid dreaming of one day being an NFL football player, only in the preacher world.

I graduated, moved back to Lincoln, finished my school at the University of Nebraska, Patty and I got married, moved to Southern California to go to grad school. Southern California was Mecca for preachers, it was the land of the giants. Just up the road was Chuck Swindoll, his church, and his ministry, "Insight for Living." Down the other way was John MacArthur, Calvary Chapel, Focused on the Family, James Dobson—they were all in the neighborhood. Patty actually worked for Swindoll's Ministry, "Insight for Living," worked directly for his wife, Cynthia Swindoll. We attended his church. He was a great preacher, he was a godly man, nothing but respect for him. But in that context, you can't help but think, maybe one day that could be me.

There's a lot of students that graduate from seminary thinking that. And I'll just tell you, that is a terrible mindset for pastoral ministry. When we graduated, my friends went to San Diego, LA, Seattle, San Francisco, Portland. I went to Broken Bow, Nebraska. Population 3,700 people. I'd never lived in a place like that. My route was Lincoln, Chicago, LA, Broken Bow. Thought maybe God was punishing me for something. When Patty and I were dating and getting more serious, she lived in Montana. So I took a Greyhound bus out to Montana and helped her move and come back to Lincoln. In the process, we drove down Highway 2 and went through Broken Bow, and we stopped there for lunch. There's a Pizza Hut that's right on Highway 2, we got seated in a booth with windows that look right out onto Highway 2. Now, I remember vividly sitting there and watching, and there were trucks and cars, and they'd go down Highway 2. Then a few minutes would pass it would come the other way down Highway 2. A few minutes would pass, they'd come the other way down Highway 2. I'd never seen anything like that, and I remember saying to Patty, can you imagine living in a place like this? Certainly, God has a sense of humor.

Just gonna tell you something, it's hard to really become a preacher celebrity in Broken Bow, Nebraska. But looking back, it's the best thing that could have happened to me. Because I had to wrestle with some difficult issues. The biggest question was, what am I in this for? Is this a way to meet some unmet need for significance? For value? Trying to be somebody? I had to wrestle my way through these issues and come to grips with the fact that he's the master, I'm the slave. And my job is to obey and do what he's asked me to do. And if he asks me to spend the next 40 years preaching in the sandhills, what is the problem with that?

God's not impressed with big buildings. He's not impressed with big churches. He's not impressed with Christian celebrities. The end of the story, the only thing that's gonna matter is did you do what I ask you to do? And I do believe I settled the issue there. We spent 10 years there, all three of my girls were born there. It ended up being actually a really good fit. I loved the lifestyle, I loved the people, it was a good fit for me. You can honestly say, I was very content, and I was not looking to go anywhere. I didn't go looking. Lincoln Borean came knocking on my door. And we prayed about it and concluded that God was calling us to Lincoln. But through my time at Lincoln Berean, the question has consistently been, God, what are you asking of me? You tell me what to do. I want to obey. This role is not my identity. It's not my significance. It's not my value. Just trying to do what God has asked me to do. Which I'm confident will be my heart posture until the day I die.

But here's the deal. This isn't just a preacher thing. It is no different for you. If your life's gonna be spent seeking significance and value in the things of this world, in your job, in your performance, in your money, in your stuff, you are not gonna run your race well. And you will not finish well. Whether you're in the business world, the medical world, the educational world, law enforcement, farmer, construction worker, whatever—it's no different. It's the same question. God, what do you want from me? What do you want from me right now, in this season of my life? You're the master, I'm the slave. You tell me what you want of me. I just want to obey. Because obedience is the pathway, the flourishing your soul longs for.

Second theme is the truth is the secret to joy. Truth is the secret to joy. Verse three, Paul writes:

> *3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy*

I think pretty much all new Testament scholars agree, the book of Philippians is the preeminent book of joy in the New Testament. You might be tempted to think, well, it's easy for Paul to say. Over sixteen times in four short chapters, he refers to joy or rejoicing. It's helpful to know, Paul is writing this book from a Roman prison cell, waiting to hear if he's gonna be executed or released. Later in Philippians, he writes "I have learned to be content in every circumstance." As long as your joy. Is tied to circumstances, joy and peace will always be elusive to you, because you've tied it to something you cannot control.

The secret to joy is truth. Even in the most difficult moments of life w can experience a deep, soul satisfying peace and joy because of what we know is true. As a matter of fact, I'd go so far as to say, I think over my life the deepest, richest moments of peace and joy have come in the deepest valleys of life. There's something about the darkness that strips the junk away and shines the light on why the truth is so important. In the most difficult moments of life, I still know God is good. I do. I still believe God is faithful. I do believe the Holy Spirit dwells within me. I do believe he'll never leave me or forsake me. I do believe he holds my hand through the most difficult seasons of life. And I do believe when the story's over, he will deliver me to a place more glorious than I could describe. And in the most difficult seasons of life, that's what I know is true, and it brings me a deep peace and joy.

More and more, our culture is becoming secular. The evidence of that, the consequence of that is everywhere. The anger, the fear, the anxiety, the chaos, it's all flowing out of empty, desperate lives. We as Christians, we live in the same culture. It's a fallen broken world. But in the midst of that, we can experience deep joy, a deep sense of peace, because of what we know is true. The ramification of that is we must have a relentless, passionate pursuit of the truth. Truth isn't gonna help you if you don't know what's true. It's not your notion of truth. It's not what you wish was true. It's what's actually true. It's been our passion for 60 years as a church to do our best to rightly divide the word and teach people the truth. That was Curt's passion, has been my passion, I'm confident that is Ryan's passion. Because truth is the key to joy.

Third major theme, grace truly is amazing. Look what Paul writes in verse five:

> *5 in view of your participation in the gospel, from the first day until now.*

In other words, it's clear, there's evidence you truly have been born again.

Verse six:

> *6 For I am confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will perfect it (will complete it) until the day of Christ Jesus.*

What Paul just said there is actually quite remarkable. This is a verse I've been thinking about a lot over the last year. Paul's sitting in a Roman prison cell. He very well may be executed because of his commitment to take the gospel to these people he's writing to. And what he just said is enough time has passed that there is clear evidence that something supernatural has happened in you. You truly have been born again. And if that's true, God promises that he will finish what he started. And when he's done, you will be utterly magnificent. It's not on the basis of your works. It's not on the basis of your performance. The only way God could make such a promise is if it's grace, from the beginning to the end.

Over the last year, I've looked at all the names and faces of the people that are part of Lincoln Berean, and the evidence that God has done something supernatural in you. You've been radically transformed. You've been born again. You have become a new creation in Christ. And if that's true, God has started something that he has promised he is going to complete. All the way to the finish line. Not maybe, not hopefully—promised. No one can change that. No one can diminish that. No one can take that away from you. You need to remember that. Not only on your best days, but especially on your worst days. It's never been about your performance. It's always been about is amazing grace.

He says in verse six, what God began. It's a very unique Greek word. It only shows up two places in the New Testament. One is here, the other is in Galatians 3. Very familiar text, we've talked about it many times. I'll give you my little paraphrase of Galatians 3. He opens it by saying "you foolish Galatians." That's actually pretty mild—better translated, "you stupid Galatians." What's wrong with you? What you're thinking is so crazy. It makes me think somebody cast a spell on you. I don't know why else you'd be thinking that. That's what he says. Then he gets to the problem. If this whole thing was started on the basis of God's grace and his Spirit, what would possibly make you think you can finish it in the flesh? That's stupid. That's what he says. When we've reduced the grace of God down to nothing more than a ticket to heaven, we serve God out of obligation, and this just turns into cold, dead religion. He started it, he's gonna finish it. It's grace from beginning to end.

Most of you know I have a bit of a love affair with the book of Ephesians, especially the first two chapters. Let me just read you two very familiar verses that are the most repetitive verses when it comes to grace in the entire New Testament. Paul writes "for by grace you have been saved." Good. That's just what I've been talking about. Got it. "For by grace, you have been saved, through faith." Okay. Got it. Grace through faith. Let's move on. "For by grace you have been saved, through faith, that not of yourselves." Just so we're clear, you didn't do it. Grace, through faith. Got it. Clear. You don't need to keep saying it. "For by grace you've been saved, through faith, that not of yourselves, oh, by the way, it's the gift of God." Yes, I know. I heard you the first three times. By grace. Through faith. Not you. It's a gift. Got it. I don't need to say it again. "Oh, by the way, it's not a result of works." Got it.

We often use this passage when sharing the gospel with an unbeliever, which is completely appropriate. But it's good to remind ourselves, this is written to believers. Because if we forget this and go back to our performance-based Christian life, we're gonna end up spending way too much time languishing in the dark room. There's no reason for a child of God to ever be in that dark room, nursing our shame and guilt, beating ourselves up, trying to convince God we're worthy of some level of forgiveness. Oh, you foolish Christians, what are you doing? We don't languish in the dark room because of our humility—we languish in the dark room because of our unbelief. We're unwilling to take God at his word that our sins have been forgiven, they've been paid for, that we stand right in the presence of a holy God. It has never been about your performance. It has always been about his amazing grace. And even on your worst days, you run into the light room, into the presence of Jesus, and you jump into his lap, and he is delighted to see you. And you dance with Jesus to the music of amazing grace. And your soul is revived. You're recalibrated. And once again, you're ready to walk uprightly, because his grace is truly amazing.

He ends that conversation in Ephesians as a result of his grace, for you are his "workmanship." It's the Greek word "poema." It's where we get our word poem. Means an original piece of art. As a result of the grace of God, you are his masterpiece. You are his trophy of grace. And one day when the story is told, Jesus will hold you up in the heavenlies, and the angels will gasp at the wonder of what you've become. Gasp at the wonder of God's masterpiece.

Oh wait, why would God do that? We have a little bit of a bad habit of always making this stuff about us. So here's the news flash of the morning. It's not about you—it's about God. Ephesians 1 tells us that the reason God has done this is to the praise of the glory of his grace. He's gonna find sinners and misfits and losers, and turn them into a masterpiece of his grace that are so magnificent, the angels will gasp at the wonder of what you've become. And everyone in the heavenlies will know, God did this, to the praise of the glory of his grace. Grace truly is amazing.

Fourth one. When Paul was talking about, at the end of verse six, "until the day of Christ Jesus," says it again at the end of verse ten, "until the day of Christ," says it again in verse twenty, "according to my earnest expectation and hope." This language is throughout the New Testament, and it is a reference to the return of Christ. Gonna give you my view on eschatology. Eschatology, end times theology.

When you go through seasons of unrest, times like through COVID, it brings out all the prophecy preachers, all the prophecy books. And everybody wants to look at the charts, and the graphs, and their biblical crystal ball, and how is all this gonna work out? And we develop a curiosity and we want to know all this. It's big business. The challenge is, there are really good, godly scholars that can't agree on the details. Because what do you know, the Bible is really not all that clear. But here's the deal, in the process of all our curiosity, and our charts, and our graphs, and trying to figure all this out, I think often we miss the point. So here's the point. this is theme number four: with certainty, we know Jesus is coming back and Jesus wins.

Every New Testament scholar would agree with that statement. How exactly the details work themselves out, I don't really know. And frankly, neither does anybody else. There's just a lot of guesswork and all that. It's interesting when you read through the New Testament. You quickly realized life was really hard for these first century Christians. Many of them were persecuted. Many of them would die for their faith. And the consistent message is not an unfolding of complicated charts and graphs, it is one simple message: Jesus is coming back, and Jesus wins.

We call that the hope of the gospel. No matter what. No one can change that. No one can diminish that. No one can take it away. So no matter what this world throws at us, no matter how many ways it breaks our heart, this we know: Jesus is coming back, and Jesus wins. In Philippians 2, Paul writes, "One day, every knee will bow, every tongue will confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God."

The United States of America does not win. The political left does not win. The political right does not win. The politicians do not win. The president doesn't win. World leaders don't win. The rich don't win. The famous don't win. The celebrities don't win. At the end of the story, Jesus, wins. And he is the only one worthy of you running your race for.

Last theme starts in verse twelve:

> *12 Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, 13 so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, 14 and that most of the*

> *brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.*

Final theme. When you come to Jesus, you did not board a cruise ship, you boarded a battleship. First time I ever used that imagery was this text out of Philippians. The people in Philippi are confused. If what Paul's saying is true, God should be for him, and if God is for him, it should be smooth sailing all the way to the end for Paul. But it wasn't. Since Paul left Philippi, Paul went to Jerusalem, Paul was arrested, Paul spent two years in prison in Caesarea, je appealed to Rome, got on a ship to go to Rome, the ship wrecked, they end up stranded on the island of Malta for several months, he's bitten by a poisonous snake, finally gets to Rome, he's in a Roman prison, he's chained to two guards, and the people in Philippi are thinking, whoa—this makes no sense if God is for him.

How do you explain that? So what Paul just wrote is, you have to change your thinking. When you come to Christ, you don't board a cruise ship. There's nowhere the Bible promises that. It's not a life of health, wealth, and prosperity. It's not a "let's make a deal" theology, that if I'm a good boy or girl, everything's supposed to work out. Nowhere does the Bible promise that. What it promises is this is gonna be really hard. This is a fallen, broken world, and there's an enemy out there, and this is a battle.

Philippians is full of military metaphors. The New Testament is full of military metaphors. As long as you think the Christian life is supposed to be a cruise ship, it's going to disappoint you over and over again. This is a battle. We are on mission. What Paul just said is you have to look at this a different way. The hardships that Paul has gone through is what God has used to advance the gospel. Even in a Roman prison, as more and more of these elite guards are coming to Christ, they're speaking boldly, more and more people are coming to Christ—people Paul could have never had access to were it not for how his story has gone.

As long as there's one person out there, that doesn't know Jesus, we have a job to do. We have a mission to accomplish. Is it easy? No. This isn't heaven yet, it's not supposed to be. Right now, we're on mission. One day, Jesus will come back and he'll deliver us to a new heaven and earth, deliver us to the world our souls long for. But right now, we're on mission. We have job to do.

God has never wired me to be content standing on the sidelines, cheering the team on. I want to be on the field. I want to do my part. The tougher the game, the more I want to be in there. I am fine with being bruised and bleeding if I know I've been a part of doing what God has called me to, to share in the mission that will matter forever.

Ultimately, we all finish our race, that's not really the question. The question is, will you finish well? I pray that we will.

Our Father, we celebrate the truth that has so changed our lives. Lord may we continue to be faithful to trust you, to be about the mission. Deliver our lives for the things that matter. May we run our lives well, that we might ultimately finish well for your glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988, 1995
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Copyright 2026 Lincoln Berean Church. All rights reserved.