

## Finding God's Peace in Tumultuous Times: A Pandemic Devotional from the New Testament Book of Philippians

Devotional 5

April 23, 2020

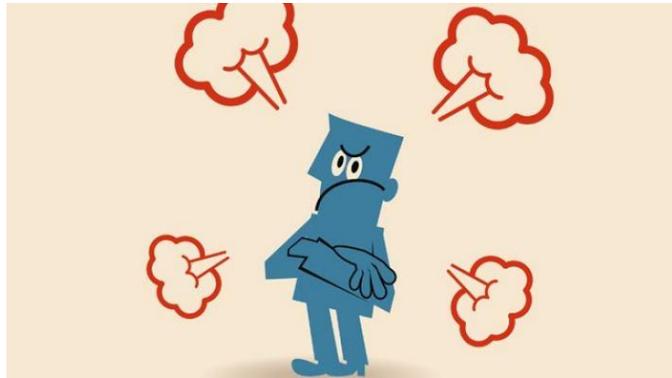
by Rev. Dr. Kent R. Walley

The long middle. There is with any difficult crisis a beginning, a middle and an end. In the beginning you are forced to rise to the occasion. There are things to do, things to get in place. Many of us had to learn stay-at-home technology and make space for a home office. Many of us had to buy disinfectants and masks. Many of us had to figure out how homeschooling of our children would work. And things were changing rapidly. Many of us rose to the occasion in the beginning.

Now we are in the middle. The middle is hard. Things just go on and on. We have things in place, now we must settle into the new normal. And wait --- and wait. For some this brings loneliness and tedium, for others it is financial strain. And many are getting restless. And there is talk of getting the economy up and running -- getting back to work -- GOOD! BUT -- we must do so responsibly, following the guidance of medical professionals.

As the long middle goes on and on, as we await the resolution at the end of this crisis, the question is, "What kind of people will become while we wait: grumblers or givers?" Grumbling can become like a competitive sport. One good grumble deserves another.

When we have less to do and we are just sitting around in lock down, grumbling can become our new pastime. We grumble against one another at home. We grumble against people in our community we see doing that we consider stupid things. (Did he just go outside without a mask? Why does that person have all that chicken in their shopping cart? They are hoarding it so there won't be any for the rest of us!) And of course, we witness our politicians grumbling against one another, casting blame and attacking the character and actions of their political adversaries.



What good does it do to grumble? Does it change the other person's behavior? In most cases not. Does it make us feel better? Not usually, it usually leads us into feeling sorry for ourselves or angry. It certainly puts the focus on me -- what I want, what I'm due, what I'm not getting. And of course, grumbling quickly leads to dissension. Quarreling doesn't really help the situation either.



There is a better way.

In the church at Philippi there was a crisis raging also. Persecution of some kind seems to have arisen against this fledgling church. And in Philippians 2:12-30 Paul warns against grumbling and puts before them two examples of givers -- those who selflessly and sacrificially give in serving others. Timothy is commended for his selfless behavior and concern for the Philippians and Epaphroditus almost died in the efforts he put forth to serve others.

This passage of Scripture puts before us two paths. It turns out there is a fork in the road in the middle. Will we be grumblers or givers? Which path will you choose? Which example will you follow? Who do you want to

become in this crisis? As you reflect on the things that tempt you to grumble, how might you turn those moments into opportunities to give? These are questions that Paul raises for the Philippians 2000 years ago that still resonate in our circumstances today.

**Read, Reflect and Apply\*\*** – As you read the Scripture and listen for the Voice of God today, what is annoying you? What is the state of your soul this day? Can you identify good moments you have had throughout this crisis and bad moments? Which is today? Talk to the Lord about these. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart and directly into your circumstance as you study His word.

\*\*Questions preceded by two asterisks indicate application relevant to your life.

**Read Philippians 2:12-30 and then consider these questions.**

### **Verses 12-18 Living Out the Life of Faith in an Exemplary Manner**

\*Paul connects this section with the one that goes before with another “therefore”. To what is he referring that came previously?

\*How does Paul address the Philippians? What difference does it make to his point whether he is “present or absent”?

\*What do you think Paul means to “work out” your salvation? Does he mean salvation is all on us? Who else is active and working according to Paul in these verses?

\*If any reasons have been given to not fear God – it would certainly be those in the previous section, considering the loving servitude of the Son of God who did not consider His equality with God something to be exploited. We see in Jesus Christ God’s profound love for humanity. And yet Paul talks about working out our salvation with fear and trembling.

\*What would it look like to work out – live out – our salvation *without* a reverential fear of God? How might having such reverence for the awesome holiness of God (such as Paul advocates here) motivate us to do good?

\*How might such reverence be the beginning of wisdom as Proverbs 1:7 states: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction”?

\*\*It is easy to get out of balance in our approach to this. Some fear God greatly, distancing themselves and not knowing His loving Presence in relationship with Him. Others think only of Jesus as a friend but forget the awe-inspiring holiness of God. Which of these two most clearly represents you? Why do you think that is?

\*\*It is also easy to get out of balance in how we understand salvation to work. Either we think it is all on us – a works righteousness that tries to earn God’s favor – or we know God forgives us because of His love and grace and so we don’t think it matters what we do. How are you at striking the balance that acknowledges salvation as God’s work in us, but at the same time calls for a response of loving obedience to God in faith?

\*What things are the Philippians to do without grumbling or disputing?

\*Why do you think this leads into becoming “blameless” and “innocent” children of God?

\*What is Paul’s concern here in context? How does grumbling undermine this?

\*\*In what ways have you seen grumbling and dissention undermining Christian witness in others or in yourself?

\*\*How have you been lately? More prone to grumbling or living out a walk of faith in reverent fear of God?

In many ways this section is like a review. Paul returns again to the possibility of his death – or he may just be describing the challenges of his life – by means of an analogy to a drink offering – where wine or oil is poured out onto the ground or over the altar as an offering to God.

\*What is Paul's attitude about this as stated in these verses? Why should the Philippians share that attitude as he says?

\*\*How are you with choosing joy when times are so challenging that it feels like you are being sacrificially poured out?

In verse 16 Paul talks about "holding fast to the word of life". This could mean the Philippians should hold fast to the word to help them endure the challenges of the present moment, or it could mean that they should hold out the word of life to the "crooked and twisted generation" around them. Perhaps in the ambiguity we are to hear both meanings.

\*\*How does the word of life help you live without grumbling, live in reverent fear as an example to others? How could it be more like this to you in your life right now? Might God be prompting you to do something?

#### **v. 19-30 Two Real Life Examples**

This part of the epistle is very personal. In the ancient world they did not have the communication technology that we had. News was often carried by means of a personal messenger. Even after giving us his own life as an example in chapter one, and then the ultimate example in Jesus Christ in chapter two, Paul offers yet two more examples. Except these are "real" people known to the Philippians. These are examples of two individuals who didn't grumble because their circumstances were hard, but instead focused on the needs of others. They became like those who "give instead of grumble."

\*How does Paul feel about Timothy? What do you think it meant to him to have Timothy's support and partnership in the gospel?

\*What qualities does Paul highlight about Timothy?

\*\*Has there been a "Timothy" in your life you are thankful for? Perhaps you might thank them today – or prayerfully send a message up to them if they have gone to their heavenly home. Perhaps you might thank God for them.

\*\*Who might need you to be a "Timothy" to them right now? What is God prompting you to do?

\*What does Paul note about Epaphroditus' character?

\*How did God have mercy on Epaphroditus and by extension also on Paul?

\*\*What modern day person or persons come to mind when you think of someone laying down their life, nearly dying for the sake of others? Might we give thanks for those who do this for us during this pandemic?

\*\*What would it take for you to become such a person who would lay down your life for the sake of others?

#### **Closing Application and Prayer**

\*\*As you consider Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus and Christ how does it make you feel? Think about those in the world today who have been such kinds of persons to us. Ask God what He would call you to do with your own life? How do such considerations put the things we grumble about into perspective? Close in prayer seeking God's leading.