

No Reserves—No Retreats—No Regrets

Humility, Part 9

Philippians 2:16-18

In 1904 William Borden graduated from a Chicago high school. As heir to the Borden Dairy estate, he was already a millionaire. For his high school graduation present, his parents gave him a trip around the world.

Now his mother had already had a profound influence in his life. In fact, she had become a Christian when William was a young boy of eight and she had been taking him to a church downtown Chicago we know today as Moody Memorial Church. By the time he had graduated, William also had given his life to Christ.

Now, as a 16 year old, traveling through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, he felt a growing burden for the lost. Finally, Borden wrote home to say, “I have decided to give my life for the mission field.” At the same time, he wrote two words in the back of his Bible: “No reserves.”

Many thought it was youthful zeal and that it would pass over time. It didn’t. He began his college studies at Yale University with the desire to openly live for Jesus Christ. He became a leader on campus and in the Christian community for his dedication to Christ. One entry in his personal journal that defined his commitment simply said: “Say no to self and yes to the Lord every time.”

During his time at Yale, Borden started a small prayer group that would eventually transform campus life. His Bible study group began a movement that spread across the campus and by the end of his first year, 150 freshmen were meeting for weekly Bible study and prayer. By the time Borden was a senior, 1,000 of Yale’s 1,300 students were meeting in weekly Bible studies and prayer groups.

Borden had also strategized with his fellow Christians to make sure every student on campus heard the gospel.

His ambition however never let up on eventually going overseas to unchartered areas with the gospel. And when he eventually narrowed his sights on the Kansu people in China, he never wavered.

His place in society and great wealth and inheritance was the subject of most questions he would receive. But he pressed on. In fact, after

graduating from Yale, Borden wrote two more words in the back of his Bible: “No retreats.”

No reserves . . . no retreats.

In keeping with that commitment, Borden turned down every lucrative position offered to him – including taking over the vast Borden enterprise; instead, he enrolled in seminary. After completing his studies, he immediately went to Egypt to learn Arabic in order to prepare for a lifetime ministry among the Muslims of China.

No reserves . . . no retreats.

But he would never make it to China. To the shock of the western world that had chronicled his decision to leave his inheritance and his wealth and connections behind, he became ill. While he was in Egypt learning the Arabic language, he contracted spinal meningitis and within a month, William Borden passed away – at the age of 25.

Newspapers headlined the news of Yale’s most famous graduate. Pundits and reporters speculated on the value of his sacrifice – the tragic waste of such a promising life.

As if anticipating the coming upheaval, prior to his death, William Borden opened his Bible and there where he had earlier written those statements of commitment, he wrote two more words – they were discovered after his death; underneath the words “No reserves” and “No retreats,” he had scribbled down the words, “No regrets.”¹

By the way, William Borden didn’t write the words, “No mistakes . . . no failures . . . no problems . . . but, “no regrets.”

Sure, there were things he – and every genuine believer would like to do over – but dedicating your life to Jesus Christ – will never be regretted.

When my younger brother, Tim, was in his final hours – in fact, within a day or so he would die from a brain tumor – I traveled to Charlotte and sat by his bed . . . we talked about Heaven quite a bit. I asked him if there was anything about his life he wished he’d done differently. He thought for a moment and then said he wished he’d been a more faithful witness for Christ.

I found that admission interesting, simply because Tim witnessed to everyone. He was in sales

and he could talk to anybody. His position was in an affluent world of medicine where his business world seated him at the table with leaders in the medical community – his annual travel allowance was larger than my income. And he would always insist on praying before meals, whether he was dining with clients at some posh restaurant, or on the Queen Mary.

Yet at the end of his life he really wished he had been even more faithful. But he never regretted living for Christ.

No one will ever say on their deathbed:

- I wish I'd put in more hours at the job
- I wish I'd landed that contract
- I wish I had caught a 10 pound bass
- I wish my golf handicap had been lower
- I wish I'd paid off my house
- I wish I'd taken better care of my lawn.

No . . . listen to those who get close to the goal line – close enough to see it . . . listen to what they say matters most.

No reserves . . . no retreats . . . no regrets in following after Christ.

- Frankly, the only way to live a life without lasting regret is to: surrender to the gospel of Christ;
- to daily bathe at the cross of Christ;
- to live within sight of the empty tomb of Christ
- and to anticipate the glorious return of Christ.

You're about to hear an aging Apostle reveal from his own personal journal, as it were, how he anticipated living with no reserves . . . no retreats . . . and no regrets.

You'll find it in his letter to the *Philippian church and chapter 2*.

Paul has just finished urging on the believers there to hold out the word of life to their despairing, sin-darkened world; to stop complaining, but to shine like stars in the night sky to show the way home to Christ.

And now Paul adds this deeply personal testimony about his own perspective in life and ministry.

Notice verse 16. Holding fast – literally holding out – *the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.*

In other words, I want you to live out the gospel because if you do, as far as I'm concerned, my life

will not have been in vain – there will be no feeling or sense of regret in my ministry among you.

And would you notice how he describes his life here.

Three different metaphors are used in this text.

1. First, Paul refers to his life and service as a *runner*.

By the way, you'll notice as you read Paul's letters how often he reaches into the world of athletics to make a point.

Here he uses a verb (trecho; τρεχω) of which his Philippian audience would have been well aware – *to run*.

In every Greek city – Philippi among them – one of the key buildings was the gymnasium. The gymnasium was the place that really served as the intellectual club of the city. Socrates would have taught there along with the teachers and philosophers of the day.ⁱⁱ

It was also, of course, the place for athletic training and contests. And Paul evidently witnessed many of them.

He would refer in his letters:

- to boxing (1 Corinthians 9:26);
- to being summoned to the starting line of a foot race (1 Corinthians 9:27);
- to runners pressing along the course to the finish line (Philippians 3:14);
- to watching the judge award the laurel wreath to the winner (2 Timothy 4:8)

Paul was well aware of the annual Isthmian Games in Corinth; the great Pan-Ionian Games held in Ephesus and, of course, the Olympic Games every four years.

The Greek cities were often in disputes and frequently at war with each other; but every four years, no matter what war or dispute was raging, a cease fire would be announced for one month and the athletes would come from all over to compete; the philosophers and poets would come to give readings of their latest works; the sculptors would come and carve statues of the winners.ⁱⁱⁱ

Then back to war they'd go.

Paul will write about running his race in order to receive the prize (*1 Corinthians 9*); he will write to the Galatians and tell them he wanted to be sure that he wasn't running the race in vain – that they weren't abandoning the gospel (*Galatians 2*).

And now here to the *Philippians* he refers once again to the athlete who has given his life and his

efforts to prepare to run a race – brief as it was – and he hoped it would *not be in vain*.

By the way, you need to understand that winning the race wasn't so much the result of Paul's discipline as much as it was in the demonstration of the Philippian believers to shine like stars in the sky.

To shine the light of the gospel of God – Paul writes here – “Look, if you do that, I won't have any regret in running my race.”

Which reveals the humility of Paul . . . we'll circle around and address that point a little later.

Now, you need to pick up here in *verse 16 that* Paul not only refers to running in vain, but notice:

2. He refers to a **laborer – toiling in vain**.

The word he uses for toiling (καπιωω) refers to working hard – to intense, difficult, painfully strenuous work.^{iv}

It refers to someone becoming weary from exerting oneself physically, mentally or even spiritually.

One New Testament scholar wrote that with both of these images – to run and to toil – relate to exertion and exhaustion; a work filled with sweat and stress.^v

And it's worth it – Paul effectively writes – *it isn't in vain* – if you get along in unity and display the light of the gospel to your culture which is lost in the dark.

Listen, this is the opposite of pride.

- A proud parent wants praise for raising children who are civilized and successful.
- A proud businessman wants all the credit for the uptick in stock value.
- A proud teacher wants accolades from every graduate for his efforts.

But:

- A humble parent is simply thrilled to see their children walking with Christ.
- A humble businessman wants to share the credit with his entire team.
- A humble teacher is just thrilled to know his students graduated and are better prepared for life.

Paul isn't going to consider his race well run just because he's an apostle and he's finished his course without falling and can you imagine the awards he's got coming no matter what happens to the Philippians.

Oh no . . . not Paul.

Like the Apostle John, his greatest joy was in seeing his spiritual children *walking in the truth* (3 *John chapter 1 and verse 4*).

It was all about the mission . . . it was all about the gospel.

During the American Civil War, General George McClellan was put in charge of the great army of the Potomac, mainly because public opinion was on his side. He fancied himself to be a great military leader and enjoyed hearing the people call him “a young Napoleon.” However, his leadership performance was less than sensational.

President Lincoln commissioned him General-in-Chief, actually hoping this would get some action; but still McClellan procrastinated and refused to lead while at the same time continued basking in a rather proud misconception of him.

One evening, Lincoln and two of his staff members went to visit McClellan at his home to urge him to move forward in some critical matter. When they got there, they learned that McClellan was at a wedding. The three men sat down to wait, and an hour later, the General-in-Chief arrived home. Without paying any attention or respect to the president, McClellan went upstairs and then didn't return.

Half an hour later, Lincoln sent word upstairs that they were still waiting. The message came back that McClellan had decided to go on to bed. His associates were angry, rightfully so, but President Lincoln simply got up and led the way home.

One of the men would later write down what Lincoln said as they walked away, “This is not time to be making points of etiquette and personal dignity; I would gladly hold McClellan's horse if it would only bring us success.”^{vi}

Imagine what this response did to refocus the real issue at hand?!

And imagine Paul's example here. He's telling the Philippian believers to get along in unity and with humility – and then he's effectively modeling humility by telling them that *their* success in following Christ makes *his* life worth all the effort and all the sweat and all the stress.

How can Paul put them before his own needs like that? How can someone surrender their life to others like this?

Well, part of the answer is found in the fact that Paul knows that his sweat and his stress isn't the end of the story.

Notice a phrase or two earlier where Paul writes in *verse 16*. ***Holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory . . .***

In the day of Christ!

Paul lived today in the light of tomorrow.^{vii}

He knew what was waiting and he knew Who was waiting to receive him.

This phrase – ***the day of Christ*** – has already been used by Paul in this letter – in ***chapter 1, verse 6 and then again in verse 10***.

Let me remind you that ***the day of Christ*** is not the same event as the *Day of the Lord*, which focuses on the punishment of the unrepentant during the days of the Tribulation (***1 Thessalonians 5:2-3; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8***).

The *day of the Lord* will be that period of time, following the rapture where the wrath of God will be poured out on the earth as He prepares the heart of the nation Israel to receive Him at His second coming; the *day of the Lord* is also a reference to unremitting, horrific judgment upon the unbelieving world during that time of tribulation.

The ***day of Christ***, however, is a reference to the judgment seat of Christ – at the end of human history as we know it. It's a time for believers only – not so they can find out if they're going to heaven, but to be rewarded for the profitable manner in which they lived their lives on their way to heaven (***1 Corinthians 3:8; 2 Corinthians 5:10***).

You do not get into heaven by good works (***Ephesians 2:8-9***); but the works of believers will be evaluated and then rewarded (***1 Corinthians 3:13-15***).

Paul is saying here that he plans to glory in the fact that his effort will bear fruit as the Philippian believers demonstrate the humility of Christ and live in a manner worthy of the gospel.

In fact, the word Paul uses for ***boasting or glorying*** can have a negative connotation, but it can also have a positive sense of exulting and rejoicing.^{viii}

Paul is actually looking forward to the Bema seat of Christ – the judgment seat of Christ – the Day of Christ – and he fully expects to have true heart-bursting joy over that which God allowed him to develop in the lives of these Philippian believers.

This is like the heart-bursting joy of a mother when her child gets his lines right in the school play; or making it through the school play without knocking over the set; this is the glory a mother feels when the piano recital piece is played well; or the

child makes the honor roll – or if they simply graduate.

Paul is like a parent – and he can't wait to rejoice as his race – his life's work – is evaluated.

The goal toward which Paul is striving – the Bema – his glory would be found in that moment. And the chains around his wrists in this house arrest while he writes this letter do not matter to him because he can already smell the goal line. Listen, Paul did have an advantage . . . he had seen heaven – he'd been given a tour early on in his ministry as God prepared him to persevere what few men have ever experienced.

He had seen the Father's house.

And he writes here with that perspective – and urges us on – having heard the cheering of the hosts of heaven for sinners who believed – and for sinners who were arriving, safely home to their joy and rest in Christ.

Listen, we have no idea what the cheering of the host of heaven is like . . . the noise . . . the joy . . . the singing . . . the celebrating in heaven.

But if the angels in heaven rejoice over the salvation of one sinner (***Luke 15:10***) can you imagine the rejoicing and the celebration as one redeemed sinner arrives safely home?!

Let me illustrate for you what might be just a little taste of what's in store for us on this day of Jesus Christ.

For two years, Rick Hanson, a paraplegic athlete, literally circled the globe on his wheelchair to raise awareness of spinal cord research.

It was a grueling trip. There are photos of him in all kinds of weather; burning heat, slashing rain, swirling blizzard, howling wind; and in all kinds of terrain; desert wastelands, dense forests, farmlands and on roads that led over mountains.

The pictures showed him with his head strained back, his neck bulging with stretched muscles; his arms taut with aching muscles, his fists like stones, as he climbed mountain roads and wheeled through rain-blackened streets of small cities with their inhabitants indifferent or unaware of his plight and his cause. Mile upon mile upon tiresome mile. Hands thick with calluses. Thighs bruised, back blistered.

On May 23, 1987, Rick Hanson headed home on his final leg of the journey.

When he was still far away, many miles from Vancouver, people gathered to welcome him. As he got nearer, the crowd thickened along both sides of the highway; hundreds of people, then thousands,

then tens of thousands. They roared, clapped, cheered and wept. They threw flowers.

Rick wheeled his way toward the arena. A capacity crowd of thousands of people, national and international dignitaries, rock stars and movie stars, television crews, family, friends, those lucky enough to get tickets – waited inside. As Rick got nearer the stadium, the streets grew impossibly dense with people. Helicopters hovered overhead. Police in cars and on motorcycles flanked his sides.

Other wheelchair athletes joined him, coming up behind like a legion of charioteers. Even above the din of the crowd around him, the roar of voices coming from inside the stadium could be heard, like a hurricane brewing.

He swooped through the wide lower gates and glided out onto the stadium track. Tens of thousands of people went crazy. Leaping, dancing, blowing horns, whirling clackers, the air filled with whistles, exploding with applause, swelling with shouts of welcome and triumph. It was wild . . . the celebration was incredible.^{ix}

A little taste of what will be our future reception – and joy – and lasting grace as faith is forever replaced with sight.

Which is why Paul can add, with the same joy, yet another image:

He not only has no regrets as a runner.

He not only has no regrets as a laborer.

3. Notice, he has no regrets as a sacrifice.

Look at verse 17. But even if – even if – I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. 18. You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.

If by chance I am called to lay down my life – that is, my race is over and my labor is done – notice – *even if I am being poured out as a drink offering . . . I rejoice.*

Paul has already taken a picture from the gymnasium and from the construction site . . . he now takes a picture from the sacrificial system.

The unbelieving world certainly understood libations – pouring out a bit of a drink as a way to say grace, so to speak, to some god or goddess.^x

But Paul has something far more significant in mind.

The Old Testament sacrificial system could be divided into two categories; the non-sweet savor sacrifices and the sweet-savor sacrifices.

The non-sweet sacrifices had to do with guilt and defilement and uncleanness of sin. They ultimately pointed to the sacrifice of Christ and His atonement for our guilt.

The sacrifices that were sweet-savor sacrifices pointed to the loveliness of Christ – sacrifices of praise and worship for the forgiveness that came from the blood-sacrificed animal. The value of the offering was in the blood – the life-giving sacrifice of the innocent animal.

But God also prescribed that certain sacrifices should include the pouring out of a measure of wine over the sacrifice upon the altar. That drink offering was to add the element of sweet smelling savor – which became an additional offering, so to speak, and it represented the element of thanksgiving.

By the way, we're told to do the same thing in this dispensation through our lips and words – the writer of Hebrews said, *“Let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name” (Hebrews 13:15).*^{xi}

Paul has in mind here the effect of the wine which would cause the sacrifice to burst for a moment with a brief flame – and sweet smelling smoke then that would rise into the air.

Again the humility of Paul here is astounding.

He's basically saying here in *verse 17* that the sacrifice and service of the Philippians is the major part of the offering of their faith to God – that's the main sacrifice on the altar; and he basically says, “My life is just an added libation upon your sacrifice; in other words, even if I lose my life, it won't be wasted – there will be no regrets . . . because I will be just a little wine upon *your* offering – to burst into flame and then drift up in sweet smelling smoke unto God.”^{xii}

You, Philippians, are offering the **main** thing – the sacrifice of your faith by your service – I'm just thrilled to be a **little** offering added to yours . . . flaming out ever so briefly for the glory of God.

So rejoice with me, he writes here at the end of this paragraph . . . I am rejoicing in you. Let's *share our joy together.*

This is the way to live with no reserves . . . no retreats . . . no regrets.

Let me attempt to tie it together with a couple closing principles.

- **First, living without regret means enabling the accomplishments of others**

How different from the pride of this world and the devotion of humanity to its own satisfaction and achievements.

One famous musician, featured in a new book – who will remain nameless – he was interviewed and asked what he thought about life. He said, You know, I prayed a silent prayer [not long ago] to the Great Spirit and asked to be worthy of more time because there was still much to do. When asked what, exactly, that might involve, he responded, “. . . happiness . . . enjoying the Earth for what it’s worth, which is an incredible place to be.”^{xiii}

It’s one thing to send a text message you’ve regretted . . . how tragic to near the end of life and all you can hope for is a little more time to enjoy earth and a little more devotion to self.

For Paul, one of the greatest prizes in life was to know that somehow his efforts were used by God to bring others to know and love and serve Jesus Christ.^{xiv}

What would you like to do Paul if the end is near – Oh, I would be thrilled to just flame out on the sacrifice of those believers in Philippi whose lives I’ve lived to help serve and sacrifice for Christ.

No regret in that!

Living without regret means enabling the accomplishment of others for the glory of God.

- **Secondly, living without regret means longing for the applause of Christ**

Selling everything as it were, for the commendation of Christ, before whom we will all one day stand.

And Paul effectively says to these Philippian believers, I’m going to be thrilled – I’m going to find such glory in that Christ has been glorified in you – I’m going to find my greatest glory and joy in the commendation of the Savior before whom I will stand.

J.C. Ryle, the well-known pastor and author who lived 2 centuries ago now, once acknowledged that he woke up each morning and while he was still lying in bed, imagined his bed to be the top of an altar; and he dedicated himself every morning as a living sacrifice to God.^{xv}

Like Paul . . . no reserves . . . I’m selling out . . . I’m not holding back . . . in order to have the pleasure and reward of Christ.

No reserve . . . no retreat . . . no regret.

In January 2006, author Randy Alcorn had the opportunity to join with Jim Elliot’s family for a dinner that marked the 50th anniversary of the martyrdom of Jim Elliot and four other missionaries in Ecuador.

While at dinner, we met Jim’s older brother, Bert, and his wife Colleen. In 1949, years before Jim went to Ecuador, they became missionaries to Peru.

When we discussed their ministry, Bert smiled and said, “I can’t wait to get back from furlough.” Now in their eighties, they are in their sixtieth year as missionaries, joyfully reaching people for Christ. Until that weekend I didn’t know anything about them. Bert and Colleen may enter eternity under the radar of the church at large, but not under God’s. Randy writes, “Bert said something me that evening that I’ll never forget – and I quote – “Jim and both served Christ, but differently. Jim was a great meteor, streaking through the sky.” Randy would later write, “Unlike his great meteor brother, Bert is a faint star that rises night after night, faithfully crossing the same path in the sky to God’s glory. Jim Elliot’s reward is considerable, but it wouldn’t be a surprise to discover that Bert and Colleen’s reward will be great still [when they stand before the Lord that day].^{xvi}

Since Randy Alcorn wrote those words in 2009, I did a little research of my own and discovered that Bert and his wife Colleen passed away in 2012 . . . just over 2 years ago.

Bert and Colleen passed away within weeks of each other’s deaths.

For nearly 63 years of service they had navigated the rivers of Peru’s northern Amazon region, hiked the Andes Mountains and had driven tens of thousands of miles between towns and villages along the Peruvian coast where they evangelized, discipled and planted churches.

It struck me that Jim Elliot, who became a household name following his martyrdom, was instrumental during his brief service to lay the foundation for one church; but his brother Bert – who will never become a household name and most of the evangelical church has never even heard of, would rise every day – like a faint star – and be used by God to plant, not one church, but 145 churches throughout the country of Peru.

A personal friend offered this memory of Bert’s final days – Bert and Colleen came home and served in their home church that had supported them for 60

years; they reached out to drug addicts and offered counseling to anyone who took the time to come to their home.

He said that Bert would often say that the Christian life is far from boring. And he would often be heard to exclaim with a smile, “What a life . . . what life.”

You don’t have to be in Peru to experience it. You don’t have to be a vocational missionary to live it.

You can experience it in bustling market place of Philippi . . . in the pressure and pace of wherever you live.

It’s a life Paul has described in these few verses – a life committed to integrity and purity; a life that holds onto and holds out to others the word of life.

It just rises and shines . . . for some it’s a brief flame that blazes for a moment; for others, it’s the life of running a long race – toiling through a long effort . . . like a faint star, rising night after night and following the course God has set out for it . . . without fanfare . . . or noise . . . or clamor.

Either way, it’s a sacrifice unto the grace and glory of God – and in so doing it guarantees it will be a life – not without failure; not without confession; not without difficulty; but a life with no reserves, no retreats and no regrets.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/26/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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i *Our Daily Bread* (12-31-1988); *The Yale Standard* (Fall 1970); *Mrs. Howard Taylor, Borden of Yale* (Bethany House, 1988)

ii William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 45

iii Ibid

iv Adapted from Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 553

v G. Walter Hansen, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Philippians* (Apollos, 2009), p. 187

vi Warren W. Wiersbe, *Philippians: Be Joyful* (Victor Books, 1978), p. 55

vii Sam Gordon, *Philippians: An Odyssey of Joy* (Ambassador, 2004), p. 94

viii John MacArthur, *Philippians* (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 187

ix Citation: Mark Buchanan, *Things Unseen* (Multnomah 2002), p. 148

x Adapted from Barclay, p. 46

xi Comments above on sacrificial system from J. Dwight Pentecost, *Philippians: The Joy of Living* (Lamplighter Books, 1973), p. 104

xii Adapted from James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians* (Baker, 2000), p. 154

xiii www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/november/2111014.html

xiv William Barclay, p. 46

xv Gordon, p. 94

xvi Randy Alcorn, *If God is Good* (Multnomah, 2009), p. 421