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Sermon: “God Always Finishes what He Starts” (Philippians 1:6)

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God always finishes what He starts.

We, on the other hand, do not always finish what we start. Our lives are often filled with loose ends—home improvement tasks begun but not finished, books begun but not finished, promises made but not kept, intentions begun but not followed through on. Our lives are often replete with would-have-beens, should-have-beens, and could-have-beens.

I’ve played and coached a lot of soccer over the years. The difference between winning and losing a match is, of course, scoring, often referred to as “finishing” in soccer. One team can completely outplay another team as far as possession, shots on goal, etc., but the team that finishes more always wins. On Friday I was watching ESPN Sportcenter with my son, Paul, and we saw a painful video clip in which a soccer player dribbled around the goalie and was all alone about four or five feet in front of the goal and still missed—he didn’t finish. It was actually stressful to watch. Like that player, often in our lives we don’t finish.

But the good news of the gospel is that God always finishes what He starts. Today I’m preaching from just one verse, Philippians 1:6, in which Paul writes, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” During this season of Advent as we anticipate celebrating the first coming of Jesus Christ and look forward to His Second Coming, this verse can give us much encouragement.

Paul planted the church at Philippi, the first Christian church in Europe, during his second missionary journey, as we see in Acts 16. The planting of the church in Philippi did not involve any of the current church planting strategies of market research, demographic studies, and the like; rather it involved a small women’s prayer group, Paul being thrown in jail, and an earthquake. And yet by the power of the Holy Spirit a church began in Philippi. Later in his missionary ministry Paul was imprisoned again and while in prison he wrote his Letter to the Philippians.

Philippians 1:6 begins, “I am confident.” Confidence is trust or reliance. About fifteen or sixteen years ago I was working as a youth minister in Northern Virginia and a mom was introducing her son, David, to me in the hallway of the church where I was serving. She towered over David, who was rather short, and said, “This is my son, David. He is very shy and has no confidence. Hopefully you can help him out.” Meanwhile, David, with his hands in his pockets, was staring at the floor. No wonder he struggled with a lack of confidence...

Confidence is vital. We need to be able to put our confidence, trust, and reliance in someone, but ultimately confidence in ourselves and confidence in other people will fall short, because all of

us fall short. The writer of Proverbs tells us: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight” (Proverbs 3:5).

Notice that in Philippians 1:6b Paul does not write, “I am confident in me.” Arguably, the greatest musical of all time is *The Sound of Music*, and in the classic 1965 film Julie Andrews sings:

“I have confidence in sunshine
I have confidence in rain
I have confidence that spring will come again
Besides which you see I have confidence in me.”

A catchy song, but when it comes to our salvation, we cannot put our confidence in ourselves or other people. We can only put our confidence, trust, reliance in God, who is trustworthy and faithful every time, all the time. We can be confident in God, because God always finishes what He starts.

And so in Philippians 1:6 Paul writes, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” God has begun a good work in our lives, the work of salvation. The name, Jesus, means, “Yahweh saves,” and Jesus, the Son of God, became incarnate to save us from sin and death. Scripture tells us Jesus came to save sinners (I Timothy 1:15) and to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10); and that whoever believes in Jesus will be saved (John 3:16). The good work God has begun in us is the work of salvation.

The Greek verb translated, “has begun,” here refers to a deliberate and decisive act. In other words, the work of salvation God has begun in us was not something God figured He’d give a whirl or try out to see how it would go. God deliberately chose to begin the work of salvation in us.

This work of salvation began long ago, before we were born, before we were a glint in our parents’ eyes. In fact, Scripture tells us that God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Ephesians 1:4).

I once officiated an offsite wedding and at the reception was talking with an older couple whom I had never met. They told me about how in their family there was an 18-year-old guy who went to visit some friends who had just had a baby girl. He told them she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Then it got really creepy, as he then told them that he would marry her one day. Eighteen years later they were married. That’s creepy on so many levels.

But God’s choosing us for salvation in Jesus Christ from before the foundation of the world is not creepy; it’s comforting, comforting on so many levels. At the Last Supper listen to what Jesus told His disciples, “You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:16a). God has chosen us. God has begun the good work of salvation in us.

This happened with one of the first members of the church at Philippi, a merchant named Lydia. When Paul was preaching the gospel there, the Holy Spirit was at work in Lydia, as Luke writes, “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:4). God began the work of salvation in Lydia by opening her heart to receive the gospel.

God did that in my life too. When I was four years old I attended a Vacation Bible School. It is the earliest exposure to the gospel I can remember. I enjoyed the lessons, *really* enjoyed the snacks, and enjoyed learning some new songs, especially, “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands.” Six years later when my family first began attending church, I felt like I was coming home. God had already begun the work of salvation in me years before, and it was not long before the Holy Spirit opened my heart to believe the gospel and receive Jesus Christ.

God begins the work of salvation in all of us by the Holy Spirit, who opens our hearts to receive the gospel in the first place, as Paul writes to the Corinthians: “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (I Corinthians 12:3). It is the Holy Spirit who quickens our hearts to the reality of the love of God given us in Jesus Christ.

I have a soft place in my heart for music from the late 60’s, and one of my favorite songs from that era is *Both Sides Now*, written by Joni Mitchell. My favorite version is the one sung by Judy Collins, who sings about love as “The dizzy dancing way you feel when every fairy tale comes real.” It is the Holy Spirit who assures us in our hearts that God loves us or, as Paul writes to the Romans, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (5:5). It is the Holy Spirit who assures us that the salvation of God in Jesus Christ is not a fairy tale, but is indeed very real.

In Philippians 1:6 we see that God is the One who has begun work of salvation in our lives and that God is the One who will finish that work in our lives. Some authors die before they finish their books and a son or grandson “finishes” the book—for example Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* or J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*. But Jesus Christ is described in the Letter to the Hebrews (King James Version) as “the author of eternal salvation” (5:9). He has begun the work of salvation in our lives, and He is the One who will finish that work of salvation.

Moreover, Paul tells us the day this work of salvation will be completed: “the day of Jesus Christ,” in other words, the day of Jesus’ Second Coming. Jesus was born, died, buried, and resurrected on specific dates in history; Jesus ascended to heaven on a specific date in history; and Jesus will return on a specific date in history, “the day of Jesus Christ.” None of these things are fairy tales, but actual historical events. No one except God the Father knows when “the day of Christ” will be—it may be a Sunday or Wednesday or Saturday; it may be in January or April or September—but we know it will be, because on “the day of Jesus Christ” the work of salvation will be completed, and God always finishes what He starts.

Between now and the day of Jesus' return, we put our confidence in the One who has begun the work of salvation in our lives, knowing He will complete that work, as Paul writes to the Corinthians: "He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful" (I Corinthians 1:8-9a).

I'm currently reading the fascinating book, *Mayflower*, by Nathaniel Philbrick, who gives a riveting account of the Pilgrims' crossing of the Atlantic Ocean in 1620 and subsequent colonization in New England. During the journey across the Atlantic a young indentured servant named John Howland stepped onto the deck of the *Mayflower* during a horrific gale. Listen to what happened next:

"The *Mayflower* lurched suddenly to leeward. Howland stumbled to the ship's rail and tumbled into the sea... That should have been the end of him. But dangling over the side and trailing behind the ship was the topsail halyard, the rope used to raise and lower the upper sail. Howland was in his mid-twenties and strong, and when his hand found the halyard, he gripped the rope with such feral desperation that even though he was pulled down more than ten feet below the ocean's surface, he never let go. Several sailors took up the halyard and hauled Howland back in, finally snagging him with a boat hook and dragging him up onto the deck... A puritan believed everything happened for a reason... the salvation of John Howland... occurred because God had made it so" (p. 32-33).

Incidentally John Howland eventually was married and he and his wife, Elizabeth, had ten children and eighty-eight grandchildren.

You may think at this point that I'll encourage you to hold onto your faith that God will finish the work of salvation He has begun in your life just like John Howland held onto that halyard, but no. God's work of salvation does not depend on whether or not you hold onto your faith; it depends on the fact that even if you can't hold onto your faith, He never stops holding onto you. That's why Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this" (I Thessalonians 5:23-24).

Philippians 1:6 assures us that we can be confident in God, because He has begun the work of salvation in our lives in Jesus Christ, and He will complete that work on the day Jesus returns. With God there are no would-have-beens, should-have-beens, or could-have-beens; because God always finishes what He starts.

Let us pray...