

Joy in the Struggle

A Franciscan Clarean Commentary
on Philippians



Joy in the Struggle
A Franciscan Clarean Commentary on Philippians

by
Sister Abigail Hester, OFC

© 2025 Sister Abigail Hester, OFC
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission from the author, except for brief quotations used in reviews or scholarly work.

Published by the Order of Franciscan Clareans
franciscanclareans.blogspot.com

Cover design and illustrations by AI-generated assistance under the direction of the author.

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue), © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

Introduction: Why Philippians for Today?

We live in a world groaning beneath the weight of war, empire, environmental devastation, economic injustice, and the violent exclusion of those who don't conform to dominant norms. In such a world, the letter to the Philippians might seem like a strange choice for resistance. It is short. It is gentle. It is joyful.

But that is precisely why we need it.

Paul wrote Philippians from a prison cell—shackled, vulnerable, and uncertain of whether he would live or die. And yet, over and over again, he says: *Rejoice*. Not because life was easy. Not because oppression had ended. But because he had found something stronger than despair: a love that liberates and a Christ who emptied himself for the sake of all.

This commentary is for every seeker and struggler, every mystic and misfit, every wounded believer and joyful rebel who is still trying to follow Jesus in a world of empire.

It is **for all people**—and that includes queer and trans readers, the disabled, the doubters, the disillusioned, the poor, the privileged, and everyone in between. We write as **Franciscan Clareans**, inheritors of a way of life modeled on St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi, who cast their lot with the poor and the powerless, who kissed the leper, defied the militarized church, and sang with joy in the face of suffering. Like Paul, like Francis, like Clare, we believe joy is a form of resistance.

In these pages, we will not seek to explain away the tensions of Scripture. Instead, we will listen for the Spirit speaking *through* them. With the help of liberation theology, queer theology, feminist theology, Christian universalism, and the Westar Institute's historical scholarship, we will enter the ancient world of Philippians—and let it transform our present one.

We will ask:

- What does it mean to rejoice *in the struggle*?
- What does Christ's "emptying" mean for a society obsessed with power and dominance?
- How do we build *beloved community* in a time of violence and division?
- Can a prison epistle be a manual for freedom?

This is not a neutral book. It takes sides—with the poor, the cast out, the colonized, the queer. It takes Paul’s words seriously when he says, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”—the mind of one who loved without condition, surrendered status, and chose solidarity with the lowest.

It is also not a book of easy answers. There are no platitudes here. Only a call to deeper joy, bolder love, and more courageous discipleship.

So take a deep breath. Light a candle. Brew a cup of tea. Open your heart. Let’s go to prison with Paul—and come out freer than before.

Philippians 1:1–11 — A Gospel of Partnership

1:1–2

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul begins not with authority, but with *servanthood*. In a world obsessed with status—then and now—Paul introduces himself not as apostle or founder but as a *servant*, literally a *slave* (δοῦλος) of Christ Jesus. This inversion of power will become a central theme in the letter.

And to whom is this letter written? Not to the elite. Not to clergy alone. But to *all the saints*—the whole beloved community. Already we see the seeds of Franciscan spirituality: radical fraternity, shared dignity, and a refusal to elevate anyone above another.

Franciscan Clarean Reflection:

To be a saint is not to be perfect. It is to be *in Christ*—in relationship, in struggle, in transformation. We, too, are called saints. Not someday. Not after death. Now.

1:3–5

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

Here, Paul introduces one of the great themes of this letter: *joy*. But this joy is not abstract. It is rooted in *koinōnia*—partnership, communion, mutuality. The Philippians aren’t just recipients of Paul’s ministry; they are participants in it. They are co-laborers in a gospel of love and liberation.

Liberation Theology Insight:

Salvation is not a private transaction; it is a communal, participatory movement. True gospel work is never done alone—it is forged in shared struggle and hope.

1:6

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.

This is not the optimism of privilege. This is the *hope of the imprisoned*. Paul, in chains, speaks of God's work as ongoing and unstoppable. Even in failure. Even in death. Even in the unfinished.

Queer Theological Note:

Many queer and trans people live with the ache of incompleteness—of becoming, of healing, of claiming space. Paul reminds us that our stories are not over. God is still at work in us.

1:7–8

It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

Paul speaks from a place of *mutual vulnerability*. He is not above the Philippians; he is *with* them, *longing* for them. His love is emotional, embodied, Christ-like.

Franciscan Clarean Pastoral Insight:

True spiritual leadership is not control—it is *compassionate presence*. It is longing for people's wholeness, even when separated by distance, walls, or systems.

1:9–11

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight, to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Love is not static. It is dynamic. It *overflows*. And it doesn't reject reason or wisdom—it *includes* them. Paul prays for a love that is both emotional and intelligent, both heartfelt and discerning.

Today's Relevance:

In a time when many churches weaponize doctrine over love, or reduce love to vague tolerance, Paul's words are prophetic. The love he speaks of is *overflowing, wise, fruitful, liberating*.



Devotional Prompt

Sit in silence. Imagine someone praying this prayer over you.
Now pray it over someone else—especially someone you struggle to love.
Let your love overflow with wisdom.



Art Prompt

Paint or draw an image of overflowing love—something messy, wild, radiant.
What color is your love when it overflows?



Footnotes & Scholarly Notes

- “Servants” (δοῦλοι) echoes Exodus liberation imagery—slavery to Pharaoh is replaced with servanthood to Christ.
- “Saints” (ἅγιοι) in Paul never implies perfection but “those set apart by grace.”
- “Partnership” (koinōnia) is economic, social, and spiritual—akin to mutual aid or shared struggle in movements of liberation.
- Marcus Borg notes that Paul’s “righteousness” is relational and communal, not individual moral perfection (see *The Heart of Christianity*).

Philippians 1:12–30 — Suffering and Solidarity

1:12–14

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Here is a radical reframing: Paul, *in chains*, sees not defeat but momentum. His suffering, instead of silencing him, has *amplified the message*. The gospel spreads not despite the oppression—but *through it*.

Liberation Theology Insight:

Oppression does not negate the gospel—it reveals its necessity. Wherever injustice seeks to silence, the Spirit breathes fire into the mouths of prophets.

Today's Relevance:

This is the theology of every Black mother grieving a murdered son, every trans person testifying from the margins, every refugee raising a voice from a border camp. In solidarity and suffering, the gospel is made visible.

1:15–18a

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love... the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition... What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Paul does not waste energy on rivalry or ego. He holds a rare humility—*the message matters more than the messenger*. For those of us shaped by church conflict, this is a hard but holy word.

Franciscan Clarean Reflection:

Francis and Clare also bore the pain of betrayal—from bishops, brothers, even fellow friars. But they stayed faithful to love and simplicity. So can we.

Queer Theological Note:

Too many queer and trans Christians have been preached *about* by people who do not love us. And yet God still speaks. Paul reminds us that even imperfect vessels can carry living water.

1:18b–20

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my salvation. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way...

Here, Paul leans on *community* and *Spirit*. His strength is not his own. His hope is not for escape—but for *courage*. He doesn't ask for release from prison, but for the ability to face it with boldness.

Contemporary Application:

We, too, are surrounded by violence—anti-trans legislation, white supremacist politics, climate breakdown. The temptation is despair. But Paul reminds us: *We are not alone. And we will not be shamed.*

1:21–26

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain... I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you... I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith.

This is one of Paul's most vulnerable moments. He's *tired*. He longs for rest. But he chooses to *stay for the sake of others*. This is not martyrdom. It is solidarity.

Pastoral Insight:

So many today are exhausted—especially activists, caregivers, and queer people surviving in

hostile systems. Paul gives permission to name that fatigue. But he also offers an invitation: stay, not out of obligation, but out of *love*.

1:27–30

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ... standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and not intimidated by your opponents... For it has been granted to you not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for him...

Paul now turns to the community. The gospel is not simply personal—it is political. To live “worthy of the gospel” is not to be polite—it is to *stand firm, strive side by side, and face opposition without fear*.

Franciscan Clarean Resistance:

Living the gospel today means resisting empire, white supremacy, transphobia, and ecological destruction. It means living with joy *and* a holy defiance.

Devotional Prompt

Where are you tired?

Where are you being called to stand in solidarity, even in your exhaustion?

Pray for the grace not to be ashamed—not of your wounds, your truth, or your calling.

Art Prompt

Draw or sculpt a pair of feet standing firm—weathered, scarred, but grounded in love.

Label the ground beneath them: *Joy, Justice, Courage, Christ*.

Footnotes & Scholarly Notes

- “Imperial guard” (πραιτωρίω) reflects the Roman power structure; Paul’s subversive message reached the heart of empire.
- “Live your life” (πολιτεύεσθε) literally means *to behave as a citizen*—a politically charged term under Rome.
- John Dominic Crossan sees this passage as early Christian political theology: Christ is *Lord*, not Caesar.

Philippians 1:12–30 — Suffering and Solidarity

1:12–14

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Here is a radical reframing: Paul, *in chains*, sees not defeat but momentum. His suffering, instead of silencing him, has *amplified the message*. The gospel spreads not despite the oppression—but *through it*.

Liberation Theology Insight:

Oppression does not negate the gospel—it reveals its necessity. Wherever injustice seeks to silence, the Spirit breathes fire into the mouths of prophets.

Today's Relevance:

This is the theology of every Black mother grieving a murdered son, every trans person testifying from the margins, every refugee raising a voice from a border camp. In solidarity and suffering, the gospel is made visible.

1:15–18a

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love... the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition... What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Paul does not waste energy on rivalry or ego. He holds a rare humility—*the message matters more than the messenger*. For those of us shaped by church conflict, this is a hard but holy word.

Franciscan Clarean Reflection:

Francis and Clare also bore the pain of betrayal—from bishops, brothers, even fellow friars. But they stayed faithful to love and simplicity. So can we.

Queer Theological Note:

Too many queer and trans Christians have been preached *about* by people who do not love us. And yet God still speaks. Paul reminds us that even imperfect vessels can carry living water.

1:18b–20

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my salvation. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way...

Here, Paul leans on *community* and *Spirit*. His strength is not his own. His hope is not for escape—but for *courage*. He doesn’t ask for release from prison, but for the ability to face it with boldness.

Contemporary Application:

We, too, are surrounded by violence—anti-trans legislation, white supremacist politics, climate breakdown. The temptation is despair. But Paul reminds us: *We are not alone. And we will not be shamed.*

1:21–26

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain... I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you... I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith.

This is one of Paul’s most vulnerable moments. He’s *tired*. He longs for rest. But he chooses to *stay for the sake of others*. This is not martyrdom. It is solidarity.

Pastoral Insight:

So many today are exhausted—especially activists, caregivers, and queer people surviving in hostile systems. Paul gives permission to name that fatigue. But he also offers an invitation: stay, not out of obligation, but out of *love*.

1:27–30

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ... standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and not intimidated by your opponents... For it has been granted to you not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for him...

Paul now turns to the community. The gospel is not simply personal—it is political. To live “worthy of the gospel” is not to be polite—it is to *stand firm, strive side by side, and face opposition without fear*.

Franciscan Clarean Resistance:

Living the gospel today means resisting empire, white supremacy, transphobia, and ecological destruction. It means living with joy *and* a holy defiance.

Devotional Prompt

Where are you tired?

Where are you being called to stand in solidarity, even in your exhaustion?

Pray for the grace not to be ashamed—not of your wounds, your truth, or your calling.



Art Prompt

Draw or sculpt a pair of feet standing firm—weathered, scarred, but grounded in love. Label the ground beneath them: *Joy, Justice, Courage, Christ*.



Footnotes & Scholarly Notes

- “Imperial guard” (πραιτωρίω) reflects the Roman power structure; Paul’s subversive message reached the heart of empire.
- “Live your life” (πολιτεύεσθε) literally means *to behave as a citizen*—a politically charged term under Rome.
- John Dominic Crossan sees this passage as early Christian political theology: Christ is *Lord*, not Caesar.

Philippians 2:1–11 — The Kenosis of Christ: A Queer, Franciscan Path

2:1–2

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Paul’s appeal begins with tenderness, not authority. He speaks in the conditional—if you have tasted love, if you know consolation. He calls not for conformity, but *compassionate unity*. Not identical thinking, but shared love.

Franciscan Clarean Insight:

Francis and Clare founded their communities not on rules but on *relationality*. Harmony was not about hierarchy—it was about deep mutual care. “Being of one mind” in the Spirit means moving together in love, not marching in lockstep.

2:3–4

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.

These words cut against every imperial instinct. Rome prized pride and dominance. But Paul says: the gospel means *mutual regard*, not selfish pursuit. It means bending low, not rising above.

Queer Theological Note:

In a world that tells queer and trans people that we are selfish for claiming space, Paul's words might sting. But listen carefully: Paul does not say *be erased*. He says *see each other*. In queer community, we learn this instinctively—lifting each other up in drag shows, mutual aid, chosen families. This is gospel love.

2:5–7

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.*

This is the *kenosis* hymn—one of the oldest pieces of Christian poetry we have. Christ does not cling to divinity. He *lets go*. He enters into solidarity with the lowliest. He chooses vulnerability over domination.

Franciscan Resonance:

This is the heart of Franciscan spirituality. Christ's divinity is not shown in power, but in *self-emptying love*. Francis stripped naked in the town square. Clare gave up wealth and privilege. This is not about self-hatred—it's about radical freedom.

Liberation Theology Lens:

This passage confronts empire directly. Jesus is not the emperor on a throne. He is the slave on a cross. He is the God who sides with the oppressed. And this is what makes him Lord.

Trans and Queer Affirmation:

Kenosis is not erasure—it is embodiment. It is choosing to show up in flesh, in vulnerability, in truth. Many trans people know this well. The cost of living openly is great. But in that self-revealing is holiness.

2:8–11

*And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name...*

The cross was Rome's terror symbol—a tool of execution, shame, and state power. But Paul says: *that's where God is*. That's what God exalts. Not the sword. Not the palace. The cross.

And so the whole cosmos bows—not to fear, but to *love that empties itself*.

Today's Relevance:

In a world that idolizes wealth, control, and celebrity, this passage is a revolution. It says the path of salvation is found in humility, mutuality, and suffering love. Not because suffering is redemptive in itself—but because love is.



Devotional Prompt

Where are you being called to let go of privilege or power—not out of shame, but out of love?
Where are you being invited to show up more honestly in your own skin?
What does Christ's self-emptying mean to you today?



Art Prompt

Create an icon of Christ not in triumph, but in tenderness.
Perhaps seated beside a homeless person, holding a child, or wrapped in trans colors.
Let your art exalt vulnerability.



Footnotes & Scholarly Notes

- The “Christ hymn” (2:6–11) is likely an early liturgical text, preserved and quoted by Paul.
- “Form of God” (μορφὴ θεοῦ) does not imply external appearance, but nature or essence.
- The Greek for “exploited” (ἀρπαγμὸν) implies grasping, clinging—opposite of grace.
- John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg both view this passage as central to early Christian anti-imperial theology.
- Patrick Cheng notes the kenosis of Christ as deeply resonant with queer Christologies that emphasize embodiment, risk, and relationality.

Philippians 2:12–30 — Shining Like Stars in a Crooked World

2:12–13

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure.

Paul speaks not as a dictator of doctrine, but as one who trusts the Spirit's presence in the community. The phrase "*work out your own salvation*" is often misunderstood as individualistic. But in the Greek, the "you" is plural—*y'all* work it out. Together. In reverence. In relationship.

Franciscan Clarean Insight:

Salvation is not a ticket to heaven but a lifelong unfolding of grace in community. Francis called this *ongoing conversion*—a daily opening to God's movement in and through us.

Liberation Theology Emphasis:

This verse invites agency. Salvation is not imposed from above. It is *co-labored, worked out*, incarnated in action, resistance, tenderness, and solidarity. God is not distant, but *at work in you*.

2:14–16a

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world, holding fast to the word of life...

This isn't about being passive or polite. It's about being *radiant in resistance*. Paul invites the community to become *luminaries*—to *shine like stars* in a world darkened by empire, greed, and violence.

Queer and Trans Reflection:

How many of us were told to hide our light? To dim ourselves to fit in? Paul says: *Shine anyway*. Even in the face of corruption. Even in the shadows of abuse. Even when the world calls your joy "perverse."

Franciscan Clarean Resonance:

St. Clare was called "the little plant of Francis," yet she shone with astonishing strength. In a church that dismissed her, she founded a rule of life. She became a beacon—like a star in a dark world.

2:16b–18

...so that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you—and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

Paul's metaphor is Eucharistic: *poured out like a libation*. He sees his life as a holy offering—not because he enjoys suffering, but because he finds meaning in *mutual sacrifice*. Joy is not found apart from struggle—it emerges *within* it.

Pastoral Insight:

There are many ways we pour ourselves out: parenting, caregiving, teaching, organizing, surviving. Paul says: *Let it be holy. Let it be joyful.* Not in denial of the cost, but in defiant celebration of the love that sustains it.

2:19–24 (Timothy)

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon... I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare... you know his worth... he has served with me in the work of the gospel like a son with a father.

Here we get a glimpse of early church relationships—not as corporate hierarchies, but as *family*. Timothy is not a hireling, but a *companion*. A son in the faith. A friend in the gospel.

Today's Relevance:

Ministry today still depends on relationships like this—mentorship, mutual care, chosen family. The church cannot be sustained by programs alone. It needs people who *care deeply and show up fully*.

2:25–30 (Epaphroditus)

I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus... your messenger and minister to my need... he was ill and almost died... but God had mercy... welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people...

This is radical tenderness. Epaphroditus nearly dies serving others—and Paul pleads for him to be welcomed with joy and honor. Not as a hero. As a *brother*. As someone who gave from the depths of his being.

Liberation Theology Note:

Paul lifts up not the powerful, but the *servants*. Not the theologians, but the *messengers*. Not the strong, but the *wounded healers*. These are the saints of the gospel.

Franciscan Clarean Echo:

This is the kind of person Francis would call *blessed*. One who labors quietly, who risks their body for love, who is not ashamed to weep, rest, and return home with joy.



Devotional Prompt

What star are you called to be?

What joy are you withholding because of fear?

What person in your life—like Epaphroditus—needs to be honored and welcomed with tenderness?



Art Prompt

Draw a night sky.

Place a star in it for each person who has helped you shine.

Name them. Thank them.



Footnotes & Scholarly Notes

- “Work out your salvation” (κατεργάζεσθε) implies active engagement, not passive waiting.
- “Shine like stars” echoes Daniel 12:3—a prophetic image of righteous resistance.
- Epaphroditus (Ἐπαφρόδιτος) is only mentioned in Philippians, but plays a vital pastoral role—often overlooked in traditional commentaries.
- Shelly Rambo’s *Spirit and Trauma* can deepen our understanding of this passage through trauma-informed theology.

Philippians 3:1–11 — Losing Religion, Gaining Christ

3:1

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.

This “finally” is not a conclusion—it’s a signal shift. Paul returns again to joy—but this joy is now *protective*. It is a “safeguard.” Not sentimental, not passive, but a *defiant discipline*. Joy is how we survive systems designed to crush our spirits.

Franciscan Clarean Insight:

Joy was not an accessory for Francis and Clare. It was armor. A response to empire. A choice to live with lightness even in poverty, illness, or betrayal. It is *not naive*. It is *resistance with a smile*.

3:2–3

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh.

This is Paul at his sharpest. He’s confronting teachers who insist Gentiles must be circumcised to belong fully to the people of God. Paul flips the script: true identity is not marked in flesh, but in Spirit.

Queer Theological Application:

Many queer and trans people have been told our bodies are “wrong”—not holy enough, not

pure enough. Paul says: *Your inclusion does not depend on conformity.* Not to gender roles. Not to legalism. Not to empire's norms. *You belong in the Spirit.*

3:4–6

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, a Hebrew born of Hebrews... as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Paul lays out his résumé—his status, lineage, orthodoxy. He was *everything a religious system could want.* But he's not bragging. He's about to *let it all go.*

Liberation Theology Insight:

Privilege must be *named* before it can be *surrendered.* Paul models the unlearning of supremacy. He doesn't pretend he never benefited from the system—he confesses it, then rejects it.

3:7–8

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...

This is one of the most radical reversals in Scripture. The Greek for “rubbish” (σκύβαλα) is closer to *filth* or *dung.* Paul doesn't just let go of privilege—he calls it garbage compared to *knowing Christ.* Not knowing about Christ. Not defending Christ. *Knowing Christ.*

Franciscan Clarean Echo:

This sounds like Francis stripping naked in the square. Like Clare fleeing her wedding to embrace poverty. Like every mystic who chose presence over prestige. Paul says: *Forget religious status. I just want to know the One who emptied himself in love.*

3:9–11

...and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through the faith of Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

This is not a transactional faith. It's *relational, embodied, costly, and hopeful.* Paul wants *union* with Christ—not through moral achievement but through shared suffering and resurrection hope.

Pastoral Reflection:

This passage speaks to everyone who has ever lost a home, a church, a family, a place of belonging. Paul says: *It's okay to lose religion—if you find Christ.* Even in your suffering, resurrection is coming.

Devotional Prompt

What have you had to lose in order to be free?
What religious credentials or expectations no longer serve you?
Can you trust that losing them is not failure—but sacred release?



Art Prompt

Create a “burned résumé”—list all the roles, labels, or expectations you’ve been taught to carry. Now paint over it with gold—signifying the surpassing value of knowing Christ.



Footnotes & Scholarly Notes

- “Confidence in the flesh” is not a rejection of embodiment—it’s a critique of systems that define worth by lineage, law, or external markers.
- The phrase “faith of Christ” (πίστεως Χριστοῦ) may better be translated as *Christ’s faithfulness*, emphasizing Christ’s work rather than human striving.
- Virginia Ramey Mollenkott’s theology affirms this movement from exclusionary religion to liberating relationship with God.
- James Cone reminds us that knowing Christ includes knowing him *in the suffering of the oppressed*.

Philippians 3:12–21 — Pressing Toward the Prize: Holy Resistance

3:12–14

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul is not preaching perfection. He’s testifying to *persistence*. He is not there yet—none of us are. And that’s okay. Faith is not arrival. It’s a *pressing on*, a leaning forward, a holy striving sustained by grace.

Franciscan Clarean Insight:

Francis called his brothers not “friars who have arrived” but *lesser brothers*. Clare called herself the *little plant*. Holiness is not about mastery. It’s about *movement toward love*. The “prize” is not status—it is union with Christ.

Queer and Trans Reflection:

Many of us have been told that unless we “arrive” at some standard—of gender, of belief, of behavior—we are not valid. Paul flips that. Christ has *already* made us his own. The journey is not to earn love but to respond to it.

3:15–16

Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

What a refreshing model of spiritual maturity: **humility**, not rigidity. Paul allows for difference, growth, and revelation. He encourages faithfulness to what we already know—and openness to what we’ve yet to learn.

Liberation Theology Note:

The church must always be *reforming*, always open to new revelation from the margins. God is still speaking—through the poor, through the oppressed, through queer voices, through ecological crisis. The goal is not uniformity but fidelity.

3:17–19

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ... Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

Paul contrasts his path with those who pursue self-indulgence, exploitation, or glory. He’s not moralizing bodies or condemning pleasure—he’s critiquing *those who ignore the cross*. That is, those who refuse to walk in love, humility, and solidarity.

Franciscan Clarification:

The “cross” is not about masochism—it’s about *compassion*. It’s about bearing one another’s burdens and choosing love over domination. The enemy of the cross is not the sensual—it is the selfish.

Contemporary Application:

We see this today in prosperity gospels, Christian nationalism, and megachurch empires that glorify wealth and ignore the poor. These are not neutral—they are anti-Christ in the deepest sense.

3:20–21

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory...

Paul asserts a *different allegiance*. The Philippians lived under Roman rule. Their earthly citizenship came with imperial expectations. But Paul says: *We belong elsewhere*. Not to Caesar. Not to empire. We are citizens of the reign of God.

Queer and Trans Resonance:

For those of us exiled by family, church, or nation—this is good news. Our true citizenship is not based on passports or respectability. It is in heaven's kin-dom of justice, mercy, and truth. And our bodies, which have been shamed and legislated against, *will be transfigured in glory*.

Franciscan Clarean Hope:

This is the promise: not escape, but *transformation*. The wounded body of Christ becomes the resurrected body. So too with ours—scarred, weary, queer, beloved.



Devotional Prompt

Where have you been trying to “arrive” instead of pressing on in grace?

What shame are you ready to release as you reach for joy?

Can you believe that your body—just as it is—will be transfigured in love?



Art Prompt

Create a visual of motion—a figure walking, running, reaching, stretching.

Make it imperfect. Glorious. Becoming.

Label it: *Made their own by Christ*.



Footnotes & Scholarly Notes

- “Press on” (διώκω) is the same verb Paul once used for “persecute”—now transformed into a pursuit of love.
- “Their god is the belly” is not body-shaming—it critiques those who serve only personal appetite without concern for others.
- “Citizenship” (πολίτευμα) was a charged word in Philippi, a Roman colony with pride in Roman status. Paul’s use is deeply subversive.
- See Richard Rohr’s *Falling Upward* for a mature spirituality rooted in grace and ongoing transformation.

Philippians 4:1–9 — Rejoicing as Resistance, Peace as Protest

4:1

Therefore, my beloved, whom I long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Paul opens this final chapter with overwhelming tenderness. Twice he calls them *beloved*. He names them as his *joy* and his *crown*. These are not converts—they are companions, family, his reason for hope. And he urges them to “stand firm”—not in anger, but in love.

Franciscan Clarean Insight:

To stand firm is not to be rigid. It is to be *rooted*. Clare stood firm in prayer when soldiers came to ransack her convent. Francis stood firm in peace before the Sultan. We, too, are called to stand—not in fear, but in *belovedness*.

4:2–3

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord... they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers...

Here we glimpse a crack in the community—a conflict between two women leaders. But instead of silencing them, Paul names them with respect and trust. These women “struggled beside” him—not as helpers, but as co-laborers in the gospel.

Feminist and Queer Theological Note:

Paul affirms women apostles, leaders, and teachers throughout his letters (see also Romans 16). That later church traditions erased them says more about patriarchy than Scripture. Euodia and Syntyche are not problems to be solved—they are *prophets to be listened to*.

Franciscan Clarean Reflection:

Clare, too, faced disputes in her community. She called her sisters not to hierarchy but to humility and shared discernment. Reconciliation is not weakness—it is sacred work.

4:4–5

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

This is not generic happiness. It is *prophetic joy*. Paul is still writing from prison. The empire is still violent. But he says: *Rejoice anyway*. And let your gentleness—your *epieikēs*, a word that means fairness, reasonableness, compassion—be made public.

Liberation Theology Insight:

Joy is not escape from injustice. It is a form of resistance to it. Gentleness is not passivity—it is the refusal to let empire harden your heart.

Today's Relevance:

In a time of constant crisis—ecological collapse, racism, anti-trans legislation—gentleness is radical. Joy is revolutionary. Public compassion is protest.

4:6–7

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This peace is not naïve. It is not rooted in ignorance of suffering. It *surpasses understanding*—meaning it shows up *despite* the evidence. It guards your heart like a sentinel. It is not denial—it is divine defiance.

Pastoral Insight:

Many of us are anxious. Paul was too. This is not a command to “just be calm.” It’s an invitation to let God hold what we can’t carry alone.

Franciscan Note:

Francis greeted everyone with *Pace e Bene*—“Peace and Good.” This wasn’t just a pleasantry. It was his way of invoking the peace that made no sense to the powers of this world. *A peace born of poverty, prayer, and praise.*

4:8–9

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul invites us to turn our minds toward beauty, justice, goodness—not to escape the world, but to *transform how we live within it*. This is contemplative activism. Meditation in motion. Right thinking that leads to right living.

Contemplative Action Note:

Joan Chittister writes that “contemplation is not a withdrawal—it is a radical seeing.” Paul says the same: *Pay attention to what is good. Then do it. And peace will follow.*



Devotional Prompt

What does “gentleness made known to all” look like in your context?

Where are you being called to rejoice—not as denial, but as resistance?

What peace do you need God to guard in you today?



Art Prompt

Create a “peace mandala”—fill a page with words or images that embody truth, justice, beauty, and goodness.

Place a candle in the center. Pray that peace would radiate from you like light from flame.



Footnotes & Scholarly Notes

- “Rejoice” (χαίρετε) is in the imperative—this is a command, not a feeling.
- “Gentleness” (ἐπιεικής) in Greek was a virtue that blended compassion and equity; it was rare and countercultural.
- The phrase “peace that surpasses understanding” has roots in both Hebrew *shalom* and Stoic philosophy, redefined by Paul as rooted in divine presence.
- See Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Peace Is Every Step* for a modern exploration of inner peace as social resistance.

Philippians 4:10–23 — Mutual Aid, Contentment, and the Economics of Joy

4:10–13

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me... Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty... I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Paul thanks the Philippians for their concern—not because he’s dependent, but because he values their *relationship*. This is not about financial dependence or prosperity gospel. It’s about *mutuality* in love and support.

Paul has learned what few of us truly know: *contentment* in both poverty and abundance. Not apathy. Not resignation. *Contentment rooted in Christ.*

Franciscan Clarean Insight:

Francis and Clare lived this kind of freedom. They were rich in joy, though materially poor. They found strength not in possessions, but in Presence. This is holy simplicity. And it is *enough*.

Pastoral Note:

This is one of the most misused verses in Scripture. “I can do all things through Christ” has

been turned into a slogan of achievement. But Paul is talking about *endurance, resilience, peace in all conditions*. Not winning, but *surviving with grace*.

4:14–16

In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. You Philippians indeed know that in the early days... no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone...

Paul lifts up the Philippians not as donors, but as *partners in distress*. They didn't throw money from a distance—they *entered into his suffering*. This is not charity. It is *mutual aid*.

Liberation Theology Note:

True community means sharing resources, standing in solidarity, and recognizing our interconnectedness. The early church practiced an economics of compassion—not accumulation.

Today's Relevance:

As mutual aid networks arise in response to climate crisis, housing injustice, and transphobic violence, we remember: *this is gospel work*. Supporting one another is *not extra*. It is *essential*.

4:17–18

Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough... a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

Paul reframes giving as *spiritual economy*. He is not interested in material wealth, but in *relational richness*. Their generosity is *worship*, a *fragrant offering*, reminiscent of the temple but transformed by love.

Queer and Franciscan Reflection:

Many queer people, like the early Franciscans, have had to rely on chosen family and community support. We know what it means to give out of our need, to receive with dignity, and to name it all as holy.

4:19–20

And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to God's riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

This is not a promise of prosperity—it is a proclamation of *trust*. A declaration that we live not by the scarcity logic of empire, but by the *abundance of grace*.

Franciscan Principle:

God's riches are not stored in banks, but in relationships, simplicity, justice, and joy. When we live close to the ground—close to the poor, the earth, the Spirit—we will have *enough*.

4:21–23

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet

you, especially those of the emperor's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Paul ends where he began—with community. His final greeting includes even the *emperor's household*—a subtle yet subversive reminder that the gospel has already begun infiltrating the halls of power.

Liberation Theology Insight:

Even in empire, there are saints. Even in prison, there is grace. Even in darkness, the Spirit moves.



Devotional Prompt

Where do you need to release control and trust in the “economy of grace”?

Who in your life has shared in your distress?

How might you practice mutual aid—financially, emotionally, spiritually—this week?



Art Prompt

Draw a table with people gathered around it—rich and poor, queer and straight, old and young, abled and disabled.

Label it: *The Economy of Joy*.



Footnotes & Scholarly Notes

- “Contentment” (*αὐτάρκεια*) was also a Stoic virtue, but Paul reclaims it as *Christ-centered peace*.
- “Fragrant offering” echoes Leviticus language—here reimagined through the lens of mutual love.
- The “emperor’s household” (*οι ἐκ τῆς Καίσαρος οἰκίας*) likely refers to imperial slaves or servants—showing how deeply the gospel had permeated Roman society.



Final Reflection

Paul's letter to the Philippians is not a relic of ancient theology—it is a living testament to *joy in the midst of empire*, *community in the face of division*, and *Christ at work in the margins*.

For those longing for freedom, for gentleness, for purpose—Paul says: *Press on*.

For those whose bodies have been shamed—Paul says: *They will be transfigured in glory*.

For those fighting oppression—Paul says: *Rejoice. God is with you. Stand firm in love*.

Let this commentary be your companion on the road, your partner in the struggle, your spark of hope when joy feels far away.

Conclusion: Joy, Struggle, and the Road Ahead

The Epistle to the Philippians is a love letter from prison. A song sung in chains. A blueprint for resistance through tenderness, solidarity, and joy.

It is not naive. It knows what it means to suffer. To be excluded. To lose status, certainty, and comfort. And still—it sings.

As we have journeyed verse by verse through this sacred text, we have encountered:

- A **gospel of partnership**, not performance.
- A **Christ who empties himself**, not to be worshiped in power, but followed in love.
- A vision of **community grounded in humility**, not hierarchy.
- A call to **stand firm in joy**, even when the empire looms large.
- A practice of **mutual aid**, not charity.
- And a promise of **peace that surpasses all understanding**, guarding our queer, weary, beautiful hearts.

This is a commentary—but more than that, it is a *pastoral companion*.

It is for those in prison cells and hospital rooms. For trans teenagers exiled by their churches.

For caretakers burning the candle at both ends. For religious outcasts and mystics who hear God in wind and in protest.

It is for all of us pressing on—not because we are certain, but because we are *claimed*. By Christ. By love. By a gospel that refuses to give up on us.

A Word to the Franciscan Clarean Community

As Franciscan Clareans, we walk in the footsteps of two saints who embraced poverty, kinship, and joy. Our lives are not measured by accomplishment, but by how gently we loved and how boldly we stood for the marginalized.

Paul's letter to the Philippians invites us to be:

- Joyful rebels.
- Contemplative companions.
- Servants who rejoice in weakness.
- Saints who shine like stars in a crooked and perverse generation.

This commentary is not the end of the journey. It is a beginning.

So go now:

- Rejoice with those who rejoice.
- Weep with those who weep.
- Stand with the oppressed.
- Practice gentleness in public.
- Speak the name of Jesus with trembling hope.
- Let your joy become a protest song the empire cannot silence.

And as you do—may the God of peace, the Christ of kenosis, and the Spirit of radiant joy walk beside you.

Always.

About Sister Abigail Hester, OFC

Sister Abigail Hester, OFC is a progressive Christian nun, preacher, writer, and founder of the **Order of Franciscan Clareans**, a new monastic community dedicated to radical simplicity, sacred justice, and beloved belonging for all. Drawing deeply from the spirituality of Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi, Sister Abigail brings together the wisdom of the mystics, the power of liberation theology, and the lived experience of queer and transgender Christians.

Her ministry weaves together **queer theology**, **Christian universalism**, **Franciscan joy**, and **grassroots activism**, with a fierce commitment to the marginalized and a gentle heart for the wounded. She is passionate about making theology accessible, applicable, and alive—especially for those who have been excluded by the institutional church.

Sister Abigail is the author of numerous books and commentaries, including *Little Girl, Arise: A Transgender Christian Manifesto*, *The Daily Franciscan Clarean*, and *Casting Out Empire*. She also curates the blog FranciscanClareans.blogspot.com, a hub for contemplative justice, spiritual ecology, and liberating faith.

Whether through scripture, storytelling, or social action, Sister Abigail's message is clear: **You are beloved. You belong. And joy is your birthright.**
