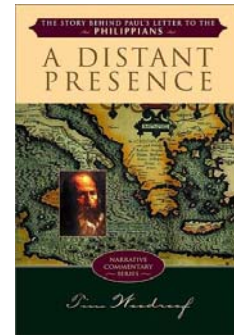


Overview of *A Distant Presence*

This summary of “A Distant Presence”—a series on Paul’s letter to the Philippians—should help you understand how the series lays out and how each sermon contributes to the whole. A reading of my book “A Distant Presence” is highly recommended before you preach or teach through this series. It will provide a great deal of background and color to the events behind Paul’s letter.



1. **Digging for Story**—in, between, and behind the text

Idea: Biblical texts are inadequate containers for the too-large stories, personalities, cultures, times, and ideas which they are required to hold. There is so much more to the story than we are told in these texts. You have to dig deep in order to surface the story behind the texts.

Working Points:

- Acts 16 and the Philippian letter
- 2nd Missionary Journey and the founding of the Philippian church.
- Other interactions between the apostle and this church
- Epaphroditus arrives to report problems in Philippi.

Application:

- We have settled for surface understandings because we think the jewels of meaning are picked up easily.
- The result has been an impoverishment of our understanding of these people and places and controversies . . . and of their application to Christian life today.

2. **I have You in my Heart**—partnership in the gospel

Idea: Paul’s relationship with the Philippian church was unique. These Christians were his “partners” in the gospel. Paul expresses an “embarrassment of intimacy” in this letter. And it requires us to see Paul with his heart on his sleeve—not as the cold, logical, aloof man we often suppose.

Working Points:

- Paul bashing—his difficult relationships with other congregations (while with them and, especially, after he left).
- Evidence of Paul’s warm relationship with the Philippians
- 1:3-9—friendship language

- 4:10-20—the matter of giving and receiving
- What their “partnership” means to him

Application:

- This book is about Christian relationships—from start to finish.
- It gives important teachings about intimacy: how to develop it, how to protect it, how to repair it.
- Paul has a great deal to teach us on this matter—if we will listen.

3. Enemies of the Cross—Will the real opponents please stand up.

Idea: There have always been (and still are) people who oppose the message of the cross. Some are obvious. But the most dangerous and effective opponents are sometimes sitting in the pews beside us.

Working Points:

- Who were the opponents in the first century?
- Jew/Gentile tensions in the early church
- How the opponents in Philippi were troubling the church
- Acts 16:19-24; Philippians 1:15-18, 27-28; 3:2-3, 18-19.
- Not always the most obvious or antithetical

Application:

- Do we have any opponents today?
- Are we willing to label the opponents . . . even if they look innocent enough?

Drama—game show setting. “Will the real enemy please stand up?” Have three contestants: Ignorance (ditzy cheerleader type), cynic (Vaudeville villain), works-theology (man in suit or sweet old lady). Host.

4. When the Going gets Tough—a church’s character shows

Idea: A church shows its character when times of trouble come. When the heat starts to rise and the pressure mounts, churches (and individual Christians) demonstrate how deeply rooted the message of the cross has become in their lives.

Working Points:

- Evidence of the Philippians' poor response to pressure—1:27-39; 2:14; 4:2-3, 6.
- Overview of coming themes: They are falling apart rather than standing together, acting selfishly rather than humbly, despairing rather than rejoicing.
- This church is at a crossroads. Their future is at stake.
- Paul steps in to recommend another course of action.

Application:

- What kind of character do we have? How deep does the cross go in us?
- The time of testing is coming—if not now, soon. What will it show?

5. Divided We Fall—stand together or fall apart

Idea: Falling apart, dividing, estrangement is a work of the Devil. Uniting, reconciling, making peace is a work of God. When churches hit hard times, they show much about themselves by how they treat each other during such times.

Working Points:

- Evidence of unity/disunity at Philippi—1:27; 2:14; 4:2.
- When pressure was applied, these Christians reacted by falling apart.
- They lost faith in each other, the sense of trust that once bound them together.
- The divide was not just between this church and the opponents . . . it was between Christian and Christian.
- Paul's recommendations take them in the opposite direction.

Application:

- Difficult times present us with a choice between actions that are characteristic of Satan (division) and those that are characteristic of God (reconciliation). Why is the first so much easier (and more natural) than the second?

6. Every Man for Himself— would Jesus ever say that?

Idea: When times get hard, self-protective mechanisms kick in and focus us on survival, watching out for our own interests, taking care of ourselves. Yet the example of Jesus goes in the opposite direction. When times got hard for him, he became more concerned for others and less for himself.

Working Points:

- Philippians 2:1-11
- What the Philippians once experienced—2:1
- The diagnosis and prescriptions—2:2-4
- The example of Jesus—2:5-11

Application:

- It is natural (and, thus, easy) to think of ourselves first when the church-boat is sinking.
- But we have not been called to the easy. We live against the grain. It is especially important in difficult times to do the right thing . . . even if it is hard.

7. Joy is a Decision—Getting a perspective on troubles

Idea: Troubles have caused the Philippians to lose their sense of joy. Joy has been replaced by despair, a gloomy sense of inevitability. Evidently, the Philippians made the same mistake we do—understanding joy to be connected to circumstances rather than stemming from a perspective that puts all circumstances in context.

Working Points:

- Trace the “joy” theme in Philippians—1:4, 18 (twice), 25; 2:2, 17 (twice), 18 (twice), 28, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4 (twice), 10.
- Popular misconceptions of “joy” in Philippians—joy as bliss, joy as guarantee against suffering . . . Philippians is known as the “book of joy” because of Paul’s many uses of this term in this short letter. But what does he mean by “joy”?
- Paul and Silas singing in prison as a paradigm for Christian joy.
- The importance of perspective.

Application:

- So long as joy depends on circumstances for us, it will prove an ephemeral thing, fickle and fleeting.
- Can we learn to be joyful no matter what is going on?

8. A Basis for Confidence—the gift of knowing Christ

Idea: What gives us confidence before God says a great deal about our view of God and of ourselves. The “opponents” in Philippi were confident in themselves—in their birthright, their morality, their zeal and correctness. Paul found relationship with Christ to be the only valid basis for confidence before God.

Working Points:

- Philippians 3:1-11
- Paul’s former basis for confidence—religious resume.
- What it means to “know Christ.”
- The difference between religion and relationship.

Application:

- We have followed the Judaizers path to confidence—stressing our competence and correctness as proof of acceptability to God.
- “Knowing Christ” has rarely been our battle cry.
- The distinction between knowing *about* Christ and having tangible, daily, meaningful interaction with him.

9. Walk this Way—imitation as life-style

Idea: The life-style Paul recommends in Philippians is so against the grain, so counter to received wisdom, it has to be seen to be believed. For that reason, Paul recommends imitation. He points out people to be watched and mimicked: Timothy and Epaphroditus, Christ, himself.

Working Points:

- Philippians 2:5-11, 19-30; 3:17; 4:9.
- This urge to imitation is linked closely to the humility/joy/unity ethic that is so paramount in the letter to the Philippians.
- The complexity of Christ-like behavior—it cannot be listed; it can only be witnessed.

Application:

- Who are the people among us who live lives worthy of imitation? Would we single out such people and name them or would we consider that “showing favoritism”?
- There are people surrounding us whose behavior and attitudes are worthy of our imitation. We should be watching them and modeling ourselves after their example.

10. Prescription for a Hurting Church—strong medicine for healing

Idea: The more serious the disease, the stronger the medicine. Paul prescribes a solution for the Philippian church that is as radical as it is practical—keep focused on good things, especially when bad things are happening. Don't let circumstances shake your focus.

Working Points:

- Philippians 2:14; 4:8-9
- How the Philippians have reacted to trouble.
- When times are hard (for Christians and churches), we tend to do the opposite of what Paul recommends to the Philippians. We focus not on the true, noble, lovely, etc. but on their opposites.
- Our focus makes matters worse and ensures failure. If we let Satan lead our attitudes and attentions in times of trouble, he will guide the rest of us. (The horse and the bit.)
- It is especially when times are hard that keeping focus becomes critical.

Application:

- There is no time when weeping and wailing are more attractive than when troubling times come. But “grumbling and complaining” will not help us be people of God.
- We must consciously, deliberately lift our eyes and see a higher calling.