

Sermon Draft for December 8, 2024

Text: Philippians 1:2–11

Sermon: “Complete In Christ”

A little context as we begin, Philippi was a Roman colony—a mini-Rome—a leading city in the province of Macedonia (Acts 16:12). It was populated with retired and active military personnel. It was the first church plant by the apostle Paul in Europe. Paul peppers his letter to the Philippians with a call to arms, entreating the Philippians to stand firm in the faith that had been instructed by the apostle and which he says was being completed by God himself. As Paul notes elsewhere in the epistle, ***“It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”*** (2:13).

How many of you have ever started a project that never got finished? We have the best of intentions, but life ends up happening instead, and we move on to other things or we vow that we will finish it someday! Good intentions are just that—intentions, not a job well done.

There's even a certain road you've probably heard of that's paved with them. Thankfully, we have a God who isn't just about good intentions. God will complete what He started.

His Word accomplishes whatever he sets out to do (Isaiah 55:11). He spoke, and the whole world and everything in it came into being. That same creative Word is speaking to us today. Let's find out what he has to say.

Our text, verse 6: ***“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”***

What is that good work Paul says God has begun? Paul is convinced, he says, beyond any reasonable doubt, that God had begun something with these Philippian Christians. He calls it a “good work.”

He uses similar language in Ephesians: ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.***

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8–10).

Paul calls us God’s “workmanship,” but an even better translation might be that we are God’s “work of art.” God is not just the Creator of the world. He is the artist who brought the world into being, an artist par excellence, who loves to create works of art. It is in his very nature to create.

In Genesis, he pronounced his work of art, the world, “good” or even “beautiful” (LXX). After he made human beings, he pronounced them “very good”—“very beautiful.”

Faith itself is a good work that God began in each of us when he gave us his Holy Spirit at our baptism. It is not a good work in the sense of something we do to earn his favor. It is a good work he did in us to make us his children, not adults of God, but his children.

Children are meant to be molded, shaped by their parents, who were given the awesome privilege of participating in God's creative work by bringing children into this world.

Children also have that innocent trust that whatever their parents are doing for them is for their good. It is the same with our heavenly Father.

Faith is the good work that God spoke into us at our baptism. The goal of faith is our salvation. But another goal of faith is those good works the Artist prepared for us to do. Paul says, ***"It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment"*** (v 9). Our work of faith is to love, and this is part of God's good work too.

There are forces in our lives and in this world that do not want to see this good work of God completed. They want to thwart God's good intention for us. Opposition is not going to stop this side of eternity.

The third-century African bishop Cyprian of the prosperous city of Carthage knew this from firsthand experience. He told his people: “Our warfare is with greed, with immodesty, with anger, with ambition.

On top of that, there is our diligent but toilsome wrestling with carnal vices, with the enticements of the world. The mind of man, besieged by—and in every quarter infested with—the onslaughts of the devil, can hardly meet the various points of attack, scarcely resists them. If greed is humbled, lust springs up. If lust is overcome, ambition takes its place. . . . Pride puffs up, drunkenness entices, envy breaks unity, jealousy severs friendships. . . . There are so many persecutions the soul suffers daily, with so many risks is the heart wearied, and yet it delights to abide here long among the devil’s weapons” (adapted from Cyprian, *On Mortality* 4–5).

This kind of opposition can create doubt. In the face of such opposition, can God really bring the good work he started in us to completion at the day of Christ Jesus?

Satan has allies: our sin-soaked culture, our sin-poisoned atmosphere, and our own sinful flesh. Because of this, sometimes God's work in us can be painful as he disciplines us (Proverbs 3:11–12).

Have you known anyone who, after surgery, began physical therapy, and then declared, “It’s too painful, if the therapy is going to hurt that badly, I’ll just choose never to walk again”? Without the therapy, the knee replacement will never work, the broken bone will never mend, the heart will fail. God will not settle for that with us.

God's work in our lives will be brought to completion at the day of Christ Jesus! It is no less than God himself ***“who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”*** (2:13). He is our Creator, the one who brought us into this world in the first place. He is the one who made us, not we ourselves. When we get broken spiritually, he knows what's going on in us.

Paul's words assure us that the prayers of those who oppose God and his people are no match for the Creator and Artist of the universe. This is the Artist who, to sculpt his work of art, first allowed himself to be disfigured, defaced, broken to pieces by his own creatures, who were no artists.

For us and for our salvation, he took our sins on himself and put them to death with him on the cross. But the Creator did not let the pain, suffering, and death his creatures inflicted have the final word. He ***“rose victorious in the strife For those He came to save”*** (LSB 525:4).

And then the Artist took to crafting the clay, beginning with a water bath. The old Adam needs to be put under, needs to be drowned daily with all our sins and evil lusts, so that a new Adam can emerge who is righteous and holy before God.

The Artist knows the damage sin can cause; he felt it himself. It can be downright painful at times—at least for the old Adam. But the Artist's work of art—his masterpiece! —will be completed!

That final day when he comes with all his holy angels, he will have finished what he started—making us his forever. In the meantime, he continues his artist’s touch ***“that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment”*** (v 9). He reminds us of our baptism; he forgives our sins at this altar. And as forgiven sinners, more and more we see those around us also as the Artist’s workmanship, sinners who are also being sculpted into precious pieces who will share eternity with him and with us those whom we also love.

Like the Philippians, we Christians today can look forward to the day of Christ Jesus, not only with hope but also with confidence that he who began this work will bring it to completion on that day.

Amen