

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **Sermon Title: The Long Game**

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### **Scripture:**

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#### **Philippians 1:3-6**

<sup>3</sup> I thank my God every time I remember you. <sup>4</sup> In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, <sup>6</sup> being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

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### **Transcript:**

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Our texts this morning comes from... Oh, by the way, this sermon is coming early. So if you're confused, it's because we're doing something different because we like to keep you on your toes. Philippians chapter one, "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." In a couple of different settings recently I've been asked, how is it that a Presbyterian church in Bellevue ended up with a lot of Rwandans and Congolese in our church?

And I say, "Well, that is a long story." That began 21 years ago when I was still in California and my church there brought a man from Rwanda named Antoine [inaudible 00:00:59]. He preached here a couple weeks ago and my church in California 21 years ago brought him to do a seminar, which I attended. I was so impressed I asked him to speak to my college group because I was the college pastor at the time. Again, I was impressed. So I convinced the senior pastor to let him preach that Sunday. How I did that, I don't know because now that I'm a senior pastor, if someone on staff came up to me and said, yeah, I met this guy. You don't know him. I

just met him, but can he preach this Sunday? No. No, I need more data. But somehow I convinced the senior pastor to let that happen.

Well, fast forward one year later and I had just arrived here and there'd been a group of people that had been praying, asking God to show us where in the world he wanted us to get involved and they were thinking Rwanda. And they said to me, "We would like you to meet a man from Rwanda named Antoine [inaudible 00:01:53]." And I said, "Well, I already know Antoine from my previous church." And they said, "Oh." And so that sort of seemed like maybe it was confirmation that we should be involved in Rwanda where a few years later we built a center to give job skills to under resourced kids, which connected us to people doing work with kids in Rwanda. One of whom was a young man named Alexis. And years later, he had to come here to the states as a political refugee. And he came to our church. And about five years ago, started New Hope Revival. And that's how a Presbyterian church in Bellevue ends up with a lot of east Africans in our congregation. And what that shows is that God plays the long game.

God plays the long game. And by long game, I don't mean God just passively watches us or kind of waits us out or is indifferent while things just unfold. I mean, God is active in our lives, guiding us toward his good purposes, which sometimes take a while to fulfill. God plays the long game like he did with New Hope. He started 21 years ago. And that's good news for a couple reasons. First is the fact that God plays the long game means that he is patient because when it comes to becoming like Jesus, maturing in my character, I don't know about you, but I can be a really slow study sometimes. I just make the same mistakes over and over and over again. And anyone with me? Yeah. Okay. Shania, it's you and me, Shania, that's it. But the rest of you're great, but we make the same mistakes over and over.

So I am grateful that God plays the long game with me and is patient with me as he helps me become more like Jesus. Second reason this is good news is it means God's not done yet. So whatever seems hopeless in your life, whatever seems impossible in your life, God's playing the long game. He's not done. He's still at work. And then the third reason that this is hopeful is it means that God is looking to our future and God is planting seeds now that will become great blessings later on, as he did in my life with New Hope Revival and the people from Rwanda. Some things just take time. This summer, we're starting a new sermon series on the Book of Philippians, which was written by the Apostle Paul to his favorite church in Philippi, in Greece. And it is like the happiest book in the Bible.

It is all about joy. I mean, it's just everywhere. He uses the word joy 16 times in just four chapters. That's four times perverse. So joy, joy, joy, rejoice, joy, joy, rejoice. And then don't forget joy. And he even says again, I say, rejoice, but here's the interesting thing. Paul is writing

this from prison, not a joyful place. He'd been thrown in jail for telling people about Jesus. And he's writing to Christians who were being persecuted and he himself is facing a possible death sentence. And his letter shows us how to find durable joy, even in difficult circumstances because joy isn't the same thing as happiness, which is based on our happenings, our circumstances.

Joy is when you have courage, hope, and a sense of fulfillment, even when you don't have anything that you want and you have everything that you don't want. And that's what this book is about. And one of the ingredients Paul says to finding that durable joy is to know that God is not done. God never gives up. God is always with you. And we see that in the opening of this letter, which I just read, especially in verse six, where he says, "I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

In other words, God plays the long game. And this one sentence is filled with hope and courage and joy. So let's look at it kind of one word at a time. The first word Paul uses is confident. I am confident of this. Paul is confident in the Philippians future. He doesn't say, well, we'll see. But right now it's sort of okay. Maybe it'll be right. Sometimes when someone asks me, how are things at the church? I'll say pretty good. But disaster is always a phone call away because that's been my experience, right? Especially on vacation. Yeah. Scott, sorry to bother you. But yeah, we got a situation here, but not Paul. He says, "I am confident. Yeah, I'm in prison. Y'all are being persecuted, but I am confident our future is good." How? Why? Well, that's because of the next word. He, very important word. "I am confident that he who began a good work and you will carry it to completion."

Paul doesn't say it that began a good work. He doesn't say you that began a good work. I mean, we're involved. We play a role. But our ultimate future hope is the fact that he who began a good work will finish it. And he is God, the creator and sustainer of the universe. It does not depend on you. It does not depend on me. It does not depend on our circumstances. He, the eternal God, is working for our good. And Paul's like, yeah, I know things are really hard right now. I'm in prison. You're being persecuted, but he never gives up. He is still working. He is not done yet. That's why I'm confident. He who began Nick's phrase, a good work in you. Not an okay work. Not a, oh, that'll have to do work. A good work. And Paul doesn't specify what that good work is. Maybe it's how the Philippians are telling people about Jesus. Maybe it's how they're growing in their faith. Whatever it is, it is good.

Paul had a deep conviction that when things are horrible and they were, he was in prison, God wasn't finished. God is always taking us toward good. And we see that just a few verses later where Paul says, hey, the fact that I'm in prison, God's using it for good. Even some of Caesar's guards have become Christians. God is using his being in prison for good Paul's durable hope, courage, and joy comes from knowing that God isn't finished and always is driving everything,

even hard things toward good. And if you know the end is good, then you can endure the middle better.

Now that is an easy thing to say, and that is a really hard thing to live. So we have to be really careful that we don't turn that into some kind of cliché that we say to people in pain. Well, God's going to use it for good, that doesn't help, right? Because if you don't acknowledge the hurt and the hardship that someone's going through, it doesn't feel very hopeful. Some of you may be going through some really hard stuff. Health crises problems, problems in school, problems at work, but in all my decades of being a Christ follower, the one thing that I am sure of, the one thing that I know that I know that I know about God, is that he will turn all things toward ultimate good. And I know that because I've seen him do it hundreds of times in your lives, in my life. And because it's the very center of our faith.

God came himself and the person of Jesus was crucified, but used that terrible event to pay the price for our sins and conquer death by rising from the grave. Our faith centers, our faith starts at an ugly, bloody, suffering, horrible death, which means it's a faith I can respect because it is grounded in the pain of this world. Maybe the career needs to crumble, because you're a slave to it. Maybe the health crisis, even the one that leads to death will unlock the deepest connection to Jesus you've ever had and usher you into his perfect kingdom. However hard it is, however long it takes, and it may take decades, God is not done and he will bring good in the end. And if it is not yet good, that means it is not yet the end. And as we wait, he gives us moments of hope and courage and encouragement. And I'll give you an example in a bit.

He who began a good work mixed phrase in you and that you is plural. He that began a good work in you guys. He that began a good work in all y'all. American culture is so individualistic. Whenever we see the word you, we just assume, oh, it means me, me, me. It's all about me, me. The Bible, it's all about me. Most of the time we see the word you in the Bible, it's plural because it's written to a community. Where does God bring us courage, hope, and joy? In community together with each other. In times of suffering, God gives us companions to help us through the hard things. It's in community, where we're challenged to grow. It's in community where we help each other experience the goodness of God. You cannot find one person in the Bible that was alone in their faith. It will not happen if we're just by ourselves, waiting for God to zap us. I mean, maybe bits and pieces, but not the entire good work God wants to do in you and me.

When God's love flows through us and masks come off and conversations get deep and hearts become vulnerable and lives are shared and accountability is invited and we support each other through hard times and link arms together to bring God's healing to the world, that is a joy producing community. And by definition, this is a long game community, by definition. I mean,

relationships these days are so transactional that if a person, a spouse, a church, a friend, whatever isn't meeting my needs, and I'm just instantly gone. But the Philippians have been working with Paul to spread the good news of Jesus for a decade. They were with him in good times and bad. They were playing the long game with him. I am so thankful for my parents and my mentors who were patient with me, who played the long game with me. They stuck with me even when I was hurting them. They loved me even when I was unlovable. They played the long game with me. Because of that, I am a better person.

Who plays the long game with you and with whom are you playing the long game? There's an old phrase that says it's not the destination that matters. It's the journey. Actually, it's neither. It's the company you keep along the way. He who began a good work in you guys will carry it to Nick's word, completion. God does not abandon his purposes halfway through. He finishes what he starts. One of the highlights of my life was when our first child was born, especially the first day and night in the hospital, right? Like we had this cute baby and we were excited and the nurses were there to help us. And then we brought her home and realized we had no idea how to take care of a baby. And as I said, a few weeks ago, she didn't eat for the first few days. She didn't sleep. All she did was cry, cry. We were getting like maybe an hour of sleep a night. And I was on staff in our church in California.

And the fourth morning after yet another sleepless night, we were not in our right minds. And my wife was sitting on the corner of the bed. And she said in a very sincere voice, "Do you think there'd be a scandal at the church if we put her up for adoption?" And she said, "Yes. I think there would be a scandal." And she said it so sincerely. And it's like, she had formulated a plan. Now, we went on to have two more kids. So obviously we love our kids. But in that moment we felt so discouraged, like we just wanted to quit, but we couldn't. We had to finish what we started. And I am so glad that we did. No matter how much you cry, whine, complain, God does not quit on you. God finishes what he starts. Maybe things are so awful in your life right now, you think this is a sign that God has abandoned me. Or maybe you keep doing the same sin over and over and over and you think God should abandon me, but God never gives up.

Not on you, not on me, not on this world. As one of my favorite hymns says, "Thou has not left me though I off left thee. Unto the close Lord, abide with me." He who began a good work in you guys will carry it to completion, next word until, that word means it's an ongoing process, right? I want it now. We are an instant gratification culture. I want it now, but it is a process. And sometimes it just takes a long time to shape our character to be more like Jesus, because as we wait, God is working on us. And sometimes it's the very waiting that forces us to be in relationship day by day with Jesus.

And along the way, he gives us encouragement. When I look back over my life, who I used to be, I can see progress. I am not yet who I will be. I am not yet who I should be, but I am also not who I once was. He who began a good work in you guys will carry it to completion until, last phrase, the day of Christ Jesus, which means either when he returns or calls us home. If that hasn't happened, then it ain't over. You are not dead. If you're not dead, you're not done. God is always working. And we are often really quick to pronounce a finish line. A relationship ends and we think that's it. I'm going to be alone my whole life. Or we face a setback in school or career and think that's it. I'm never going to have a good job. Or we fall back into the same sin over and over. And just like that's it. It's never going to get better. Sometimes we pronounce finish lines on other people. They're never going to change, but God plays the long game.

Always working on you, on me, on this world, whether we see it or not. So this week two things based on this verse. First, whatever seems hard or difficult or painful in your life take hope. God is not done. God never gives up and ask him to give you more hope because this kind of hope isn't natural. It's supernatural. So ask him to give it to you. And then second for this week, be expectant for what's ahead. Way back when I was still in my former church and met Antoine, I had no idea. In that moment, I had no idea that God had started in my life something that was going to be a huge blessing for me for decades to come. The relationships I have with people from Rwanda, like Pastor Alexis, who teach me so much about God, the ways I have seen God move to bring reconciliation after the genocide there on trips from this church and seeing victims and the perpetrators reconcile.

Those are some of the most amazing moments that I've ever had in my life where I've seen the power of God. Way back then, I just thought I was meeting someone, just asking someone to speak to my college group, but God was playing the long game, putting into play a process that would bless me, bless this church, and bless people in Rwanda. And now Congo, who in some cases literally did not die because of the ways that we have been involved there. I had no idea 21 years ago that God was doing all of that when I met Antoine. But he was. So how do you not know? How do you not know that something that today you hardly notice, some event, some meeting, someone you run into. This thing that may seem so small, so trivial, how do you know it's not God putting into play something that is going to be a huge blessing for you for decades to come? Be expectant.

Back when I was doing college ministry, I had a student who had this really solid faith and trust in Jesus. And one day I asked him why his faith was so strong. And he said, "Well, it's because my dad gave me a really good example." And he told me a couple stories. And one of them was that at one point, his dad who was a developer had constructed this mall, had built this shopping center and the anchor store was going to be this big grocery store to anchor the mall. And a month before the mall was supposed to open, his dad was praying and said, Lord, if I'm

doing anything wrong in this project, show me. Why would you pray that? That's just asking for it, right? That's just asking for trouble. The very next day, the very next day, the grocery store that was supposed to anchor his mall pulled out the very next day. A month before the mall was supposed to open.

He had invested all of his money in this mall. And now he had no anchor store. He was facing complete financial ruin, but he kept saying to his family, I prayed about this and this is an answer to my prayer. Not the answer I wanted, but God answered. And I don't know what God's doing, but I know he's doing something. My student was a teenager at the time. And he was worried. He's like, "Well, what does this mean? Are we going to have to move? Are we going to have to sell our house? What's going to happen?" And his dad and his mom, they felt that stressed. They had sleepless nights too, but they also had moments where God encouraged them and their community encouraged them. And his dad kept saying, I know God's doing something. I just don't know what he's doing. This went on for a year.

Money was tight. His dad had to borrow more money as he searched for a new anchor store and was getting worse and worse. Finally, after a year he found another big store to anchor his mall. And then a little while later, the grocery store that was supposed to anchor his mall, that store went completely out of business. And every other mall that had that store as their anchor was in serious trouble. And my student cited that experience as just one of the examples that his dad had given him about what it means to trust in God. And he says, that's why. He modeled it for me. That's why I can trust in God. Now, God didn't cause that anchor store to pull out, but he used it and he was playing the long game with it working toward good. Even though the situation was not good, building this man's faith, building his son's faith, helping them all get closer to Jesus.

None of which could have happened instantly. It was the very process of having to wait and trust that developed the strong faith, both in this man and in his son. And in something as stressful as facing complete financial ruin, they could still have hope. They could still have courage. They still had durable joy because they trusted that he who began a good work was not done and he would carry it on to completion. And so this dad passed on a strong faith to his son. You can lose an anchor store for that. You can face financial ruin for that.

So today, wherever you are wondering is God with me? Is God with me? Remember he plays the long game and sometimes that long game, last years, sometimes not that long, but he is with you because whether we see it or not, no matter what setbacks we face, no matter how hopeless something seems, when we are sinning and when we are sainting, when we are winning and when we are losing, when things are going great and when things are going terrible, he who

began a good work is still working in you, on you, through you, and for you. And he will carry it to completion because God never gives up.

So Lord help us to believe that. It is an easy thing to say. It is a hard thing to live, especially when we face difficult, painful, challenging times. So Lord Jesus, ask that you would confirm this truth in our heart. You do not give up. You do not quit. You do not abandon us. You are playing the long game with our good in mind. Lord, help us to believe that today and live as though it we're true, because we know it is. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Where do you need to trust that God never gives up and is still at work, and how can you increase that trust?
- Who has been patient with you, playing the long game, as you grow to become more like Jesus? Who is God calling you to be patient with as they grow to become more like Jesus and specifically what would that look like if you did?

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.