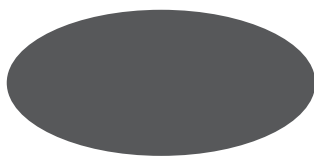


THE STORY BEHIND PAUL'S LETTER TO THE  
≈ PHILIPPIANS ≈

# A DISTANT PRESENCE



*Tim Woodroof*

## *Prologue*

# WITH A SOLDIER TO GUARD HIM

(JANUARY, A.D. 62)

THE SINGLE WINDOW OPENING INTO HIS BEDROOM WAS SMALL AND COVERED WITH oilcloth. Set high in the wall to afford a measure of privacy from the tenants across the way, it watched over the chamber within—a cycloptic eye staring from a masonry face.

As windows go, it had its problems. Rain seeped through the cloth to collect in puddles on the sill and floor. When the wind blew sharply (or neighborhood children threw rocks), the cloth tore and needed replacement. In the cold, it turned the smoke of the stove back into the room but retained none of the heat.

For all its shortcomings, the window did leak a little light and permitted a lonely man to eavesdrop on the noisy city outside. He considered the window a blessing from God.

Morning was breaking, and the first grays of dawn touched the window and crept into the room. Shapes began to emerge from the darkness—indistinct lumps resolving into furnishings and pots and scrolls. In the corner, a man knelt, swaying back and forth to some internal rhythm. He had stripped the blanket from the bed and wrapped it around himself for warmth. A shawl covered his head and shoulders. He mumbled softly, praying in Hebrew, rolling the familiar consonants around in his mouth before releasing them on their journey to God.

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The man paused and glanced up to note the coming light. The deep lines in his face, accentuated by the shadows, testified to a hard life. The cheeks were hollowed, the eyes sunken. In the morning gray, he looked used up.

But seeing the daylight, he smiled. The unruly mass of wrinkles rearranged themselves into a look of simple pleasure. For a moment, the weariness receded and the joy of a new day animated his face. There was yet life in the old man, a strength that could be summoned by an act of will—or by the promise of dawn.

*Psalm 5:3 (NIV)*

**“In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice,”** he intoned, borrowing from the Psalms. **“In the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.”**

He rose slowly from the floor, taking time to stretch his legs and unkink his back. When at last he stood upright, he still stooped noticeably, leaning to the right and canting his head to balance. He was a crooked man, all angles and curves, with hardly a plumb line to his person. He had not always been so—in his youth he’d stood erect enough. But time and injury had bent him beyond straightening.

That, he did not consider a blessing from God.

Shrugging off the prayer shawl and throwing the blanket on the bed, he stepped out of his tunic. His body was compact, narrow in frame. There was no fat on him, though the skin sagged and wrinkled in the way of old people. A mat of gray hair covered his arms and chest, and he stood on strong, well-formed legs. Once, he’d been quite vain about his legs.

Taking up a chamber pot, the old man relieved himself and set down the pot by the door. He moved to the table and dipped his hands into a basin, rinsing his face in the frigid water. Letting the water run down his forearms (in the manner of his countrymen), he dried himself and hurriedly dressed.

It was time to get on with his day.

The adjoining room was larger and lighter than his

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own, serving as kitchen, meeting area, and bedroom for the rotation of soldiers assigned to guard him. The old man smiled at the snoring figure stretched upon the bed. This particular guard liked his drink in the evening and often slept later than was strictly permitted.

Quietly pouring the wastes from the soldier's chamber pot into his own, the prisoner eased out of the apartment and descended three flights of stairs to the ground floor. Opening the gate leading from the courtyard, he emptied the contents of his pot into the street.

The city was awakening. He paused to drink in the sounds of the morning—the clanking of pots, the strident hawkings of optimistic vendors, the sizzle of cooking fires, the grunts and curses of men carrying burdens, the clip-clop of horses' hooves. Upstairs in the apartment building, he could hear children crying and spouses taking up afresh the arguments of the night before. He felt the rumble of a heavy wagon carrying its load to market.

The old man loved mornings. He loves these sounds.

With a sigh, he turned and went back upstairs to his apartment. The soldier was sitting up in bed, his head held gingerly in his hands.

"It's early for you, isn't it, Rufus? God be with you!" he called softly.

"And the Devil take you," growled the soldier. His head pounded and his mouth tasted stale and dry. He sat very still, hoping a lack of motion would calm his aching temples. Through half-closed eyes, he watched as the old man rebuilt the fire in the stove and set a pot of water to heat. Running a calloused hand over his face and eyes, Rufus swung his feet to the floor and waited for the room to stop moving.

As he did every morning, when his turn to guard this prisoner came up in the rotation, the grizzled soldier told himself how fortunate he was. This was not bad duty. The bed was warm and dry. He could sleep through the night. There was nothing dangerous about the prisoner. Not the worst duty Rufus had ever drawn.

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Except the old man talked. Or, rather, he questioned. Strange, probing questions that made the veteran uncomfortable. He had been a man of action all his life, not given to introspection and the deeper issues of life. If it could not be solved with a sword or a swat, he didn't waste his time. Not if he could help it, that is. Not if old men would leave him alone and cease asking questions that had no answers.

The questions bothered his sleep. Deep in the night, Rufus would wake with a start and realize he had been going over their conversations in his dreams. He would lie wide-eyed in the dark, thinking thoughts not proper for a soldier of the empire—a man who had killed and raped—to think. *I've gotten above myself*, he thought bitterly at such times. Angry, he would curse himself a fool for worrying about the gods and whether they cared about the actions of a simple soldier. In the end, he would rise from his bed, grab the wine flask, and drink himself back to dreamless slumber.

Twice in the past month, Rufus had traded duty with another soldier in his squad, choosing to stand watch through the cold of night rather than face this withered Jew with his worrisome questions. Now, warily, he watched as the old man spread sawdust on the floor and began sweeping up the debris of the previous day. *No*, thought the soldier. *He is not a dangerous man. But he sure scares me.*

At that instant, the old man turned from his broom and fixed Rufus with a steady gaze. The eyes gave an illusion of seeing through the soldier, reaching into him and discovering his hidden places. The soldier knew better. He knew the old man could barely see past his own hand, so poor were his eyes. He had to squint hard just to read. Still, Rufus avoided the gaze and looked at his feet, pretending to busy himself with lacing his sandals.

“Are you ready to face the day, Rufus?”

“One day's like another, old man. You either face it or

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fall on your sword. Given the alternative, even dealing with the likes of you seems bearable.” The soldier looked up. “Only, no talk today. Just do your work and leave me alone.”

The old man smiled innocently. “As you wish, Rufus. Even Gentiles deserve a Sabbath rest once in a while. So no talk today. We’ll declare it a Holy Day, devoted to rest and to prayer.” He paused and seemed to consider the terms of his accommodation. “Do you know how to pray, Rufus? Do you think God listens to your prayers?”

The soldier glared hard at Paul and told him emphatically that if he did not shut up, he was likely to meet God with great suddenness and could ask his questions in person.