

Partnership, Philippians 1

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[0 : 00] If you don't have a Bible, just wave a hand around and a steward will bring one to you. They sort of drop down from the sky. So it would be really helpful because I just want to move around the book a little bit.

Thank you very much indeed. How do you say thank you?

How do you say thank you? Do you say it verbally? Thank you. Is that what you do? Do you phone somebody up and say, I want to say thank you?

Do you send a text to somebody with your thumbs and say thank you? How do you say thank you? There's a very ancient way of doing so, you know, extremely ancient.

You thank somebody by writing them a letter. That's what we've got here in front of us. The most delightful thank you letter that you've ever, ever read. And you'll find that.

[1 : 07] Don't take my word for it. Take Paul's word for it. Chapter 4 and verse 14. It's always best, isn't it? Like in detective agents, in Agatha Christie.

Always go to the last page first. So here is, here's the reason for the letter. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me.

That's the partnership word. Not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you only. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.

It's just a brilliant, brilliant thank you letter. The letter is full of joy. It's full of gratitude. It's probably one of the most encouraging letters in the New Testament.

It calls for believers to be humble, to be humble servants of Jesus Christ, and to stick together to make the gospel known.

[2 : 16] So I'd like to break the first chapter down into three sections. First of all, we'll see the thanksgiving for partnership, particularly in verse 4. 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.

Your partnership, your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 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.

Here's the first great encouragement in the book. Gospel partnership. Now notice carefully that this is the letter from two people, not just from one. Did you see that in verse 1?

Paul and Timothy, servants, plural, of Christ Jesus. They're gospel partners together, these two, aren't they? And they're described as servants.

Servanthood becomes a big theme in this letter. And it's written to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with, and again it's a group, overseers and deacons.

[3 : 28] Overseers are the elders who oversee the work, and the deacons often carry out the tasks. Again, it's partnership, isn't it? Partnership. There's more than one group, and he wishes them grace and peace in verse 2.

Two, two very warm and encouraging Christian concepts, essential for any healthy church. In my own daily readings this week in the Bible, I came across this little paragraph.

Nothing to do with this passage. It was just a general comment about grace and truth. It said, Grace and peace are not hollow platitudes. They are key to what sets Christ's cosmic rule apart from any human emperor or system.

They're key to what sets Christ's cosmic rule apart from any human emperor or system. For who else can offer to every person on earth the wonders of God's undeserved forgiveness and mercy? And who else can restore us and the entire creation to everything we were created to be? This is real peace. A very helpful comment, isn't it, on grace and peace.

[4 : 46] You see, we can't be Christians without God's rich grace. Indeed, without God's grace, we can't know God at all, can we? His lavish outpouring of himself on undeserving people like us is the starting point for us to have any relationship with him whatsoever, isn't it?

And then add peace to that, that great peace we discover that we have because of the Lord Jesus uniting us to our Father. Now, what is so striking in these opening verses, having had a little rant about grace and peace, what is so striking is the plurality of it all.

The pair of them, Paul and Timothy, servants, all God's holy people, together, overseers and deacons, grace and peace to you, plural. This is partnership.

This is working together, isn't it? Paul is really, really thankful for this church. That's how he starts his prayer in verse 3. I thank God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy, he says.

Really, really thankful for them. He had planted the church. You can read about it in Acts 16. There are three key people there who were turned to Christ when Paul went there.

[6 : 01] And they've given him such joy. They've contributed to him financially as he's carried on his gospel work. They are true gospel partners with him. And he is very, very fond of them.

Look at verse 8. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ. Indeed, he believes that God will continue his work that was started through him right to the end.

That's verse 6, isn't it? I think that's our prayer for our Nepalese friends, isn't it? For our young people. That God will start a work amongst them and continue it right through to the end. Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you, God will carry it on to completion until that final day, the day of Christ Jesus.

It is a great joy, isn't it, to know that one's ministry is effective. Well, I'm speaking to myself here. You see, very little gospel work is done solo. We need all the one another's in the Bible, don't we? We need all the gospel partners we can find. We need to build teams. So essential to see the gospel growing, working together. Think how much time Jesus invested with his 12-man team that he selected.

[7 : 16] And then with the inner three who were closer to him than the others. Sure, he was a pioneer. Sure, he was a leader. Only he went to the cross.

They didn't. But en route, he built teams. He trained. He partnered. He entrusted them with ministry at times. Partnership is key to effective gospel growth.

I learnt this many years ago. In a previous town where we lived, a small little place, largest village in England, a group of Americans descended on our small village.

They were pioneering gospel work into what was then called Eastern Europe, Central Europe now. I was fascinated that God sent four or five couples, families in fact.

You see, our British strategy had always been you send a missionary. You send one person, a single person or a couple. But the Americans thought in terms of teams. Open my eyes to see that that was much more a New Testament model.

[8 : 22] And in our own context, partnering with others shares their joys and their sorrows, their encouragements as well as their disappointments. Now, think of ourselves.

That's one of the great benefits of being an independent church linked to other independent churches, the fellowship of independent evangelical churches. We are linked, you know, with over 600 churches like-minded like us around the country.

Or think of our belonging to our local Surrey gospel partnership. There are 13 or 14 churches like-minded working together in this area for the gospel.

Johan and I were there on Tuesday at our bi-monthly lunch that we have together. We have to bring our own lunch, by the way, but it's a good one. Particularly if you've got a good wife who can cook.

That's another story. What we learned was really encouraging. We met a man who's just arrived in this country recently. He's a Syrian, Kurdish Syrian, who's come to do gospel work among some of the Muslim people who live around the Woking area.

[9 : 33] It was fantastic. Fantastic to hear those kinds of stories. Think of our gospel partnerships around the world that we've got as this church. We've thought of one this morning in Nepal.

But think of the link with Ukraine, with Pastor Dima and the Kadena Gora Church. And, you know, they're not merely one-way links. We used to think that we in the West would take the gospel out to the other places.

And we're... No, it's not one way. It's two-way. We'll hear that on Wednesday night. We learn from them as they learn from us. We encourage them as they encourage us.

We support them as they support us. We pray for each other and we exchange visits. And we feel invigorated by one another. And what binds us together is not our churchmanship.

It's not the shape of our church. It's the gospel that binds us together. Thank God for gospel partnerships. Partnerships. But partnerships aren't merely for mutual benefit.

[10:42] They're to enable the gospel to progress. They help us fulfil the great commission to make Christ known all over the world. Gospel partnership is for progress in the gospel.

And I think that's where we come to next in the text. As we thank God for partnership from verses 4 and 5. So I think we can look next at the prayer.

Come down to verse 9. This is my prayer. This is my prayer. That your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. That you may be able to discern what is best and be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

Filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. You see, his thanksgiving for the church, his joy, leads him to what we could call intercession.

Praying for them. And praying for them particularly to grow, to progress, to develop in their walk with God. Especially in their love and their knowledge.

[11:54] I've often wondered, is this a prayer for love or is it a prayer for knowledge? It's a prayer for both actually, isn't it? That's the easiest way to deal with it. A prayer for both. That they might grow.

Grow with love for one another. Grow with understanding and knowledge and insight. Discerning what is best. Right up to the day of Christ. The final day, you see. End of verse 10.

Filled with the outworkings of righteousness. All to the praise and glory of God. Now, I want to suggest, brothers and sisters, that we should pray like this.

You see, we often take a phrase from a Bible. When you hear somebody pray, they take a phrase from a Bible, an idea from the Bible, and they pray it. Fine. That's fine. That's fine. When do we ever take chunks of the Bible and pray that? Or a psalm and pray that?

Very helpful, isn't it? What if we took this whole prayer, with all its rich concepts, as we pray for one another? Maybe we could do that when we gather on Zoom for our monthly time of prayer.

[12:56] Or whether in our small groups when we pray. We could use a prayer like this. We could pause prayer for progress in the gospel. Both personally and for the churches we partner with.

Prayer for progress. Progress. Well, in the shuffling around of how we were going to divide up Philippians, Johan and I had suggested that we stopped at verse 11.

But I'd already prepared a lot more, and there's still time, and I'm going to keep going. So the next bit we're going to cover twice. I'll do a bit now, and then Johan will do a bit next week.

So let's see how we get on. Because I think the third bit is the punch that I want to leave you with. And it's this. In all that Paul talks about in this letter, it's Christ above all things.

Look at 12. Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. But what's happened to him is that he's in prison.

[13:57] Well, look down at verse 14, where he tells you, And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

Paul is going to tell us a little bit about his situation. And he's going to show us that whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, they can be used of God for gospel advance.

That's really what 12 is about, isn't it? Whatever's happened to me has served to advance the gospel. And he tells a personal story in 13. As a result, it's become clear throughout the whole palace guard.

That's where he's held in prison. And to everyone else, that I'm in chains for Christ. But because of his chains, people dare to talk about Christ all the more, to proclaim the gospel without fear.

Gospel advance means that the gospel stands supreme. And by the gospel, we mean Jesus Christ, the good news, stands supreme. He's the heart of the gospel, isn't he?

[15:02] And that's where Paul's confidence is. You've got that clearly in verse 4, his confidence. He's confident in the Lord. You've got that there in the second half.

People dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. And then he tells us some other things that we'll come to in a moment. But he isn't over-concerned for himself.

That's what strikes me. His confidence is in Christ. That Christ will lead more and more people to himself. That his partners will make Christ known more and more.

That's what strikes me. It's not about him. Terrible circumstances, he's in. It's about the gospel. It's about Christ being made known. Now, I don't know how you feel, but I think in our Western world, we are far, far too wrapped up in ourselves.

We're too concerned for our own aches and pains. I was going to tell you my aches and pains.

Thank you for your prayers. I was going to tell you about the cancer treatment I'm having and all the stomach issues that are causing it and all the rest of it.

[16:06] I was going to have a good moan about that. And I thought, no, don't do that. Shut your mouth, Ross. How do you pray for people who are sick, by the way?

I've often thought about this. Dear old so-and-so in hospital with their bad toe. I feel so sorry for them. I can't walk around. Have you ever thought of this? They are in hospital with their bad toe with half a dozen other people around them.

They can talk to their fellow patients about Christ in a way that you and I can't. Have you ever thought about that? I've had some fantastic... Oh, no, I wasn't going to talk about it. I've had some fantastic conversations in the cancer wards.

Terrific conversations. I suppose when people realise that they're seriously, seriously ill, they're willing to open up. Staff as well as patients. You see, the gospel is what matters.

Getting the gospel to others is what matters. It's not me and my big toe. I think it would be wonderful to pray for unwell friends that there'll be great witnesses to Christ in their sickness, in their hospital beds.

[17:14] This is a gospel man concerned for others. This is a man concerned for fellow believers at Philippi and that the fellow believers will reach more people for Christ. This is a man concerned for us. This is a man concerned for us.

This is his partnership. This is his true partnership. And doesn't it need our prayers? It needs his prayers. You see, the reason why gospel advance is key to our own health and growth is that without it, we'll turn inwards and shrivel.

And hasn't that happened in the Western world? Aren't we so rapt? I mean, that's all me, ever since the Enlightenment and individualism. And the me culture has just shot up, hasn't it? So strong is Paul about the gospel, making progress to those who don't yet know Christ, that he calls for Christ to be preached, irrespective of personal circumstances.

Look at verse 18. He says, what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.

And because of this, I rejoice. Now, this next section, you've got a week to think about it before Johan preaches on it properly.

[18:31] This next section troubles me. It goes against my grain and I think it will against yours. How can people with false motives preach the gospel?

That's what he's going to talk about, whether from false motives or pure. The gospel is more important. The gospel matters. Christ matters more than anything else. Motives are less so. That makes me shudder. I'm concerned for motive. No. Paul says, you be clear on the gospel. The gospel stands strong.

Christ can hold his own. You make Christ known. Make him known. Forget the motives, whether from pure or impure motives. As I say, I shudder at that. But that's what he says.

He's more concerned that Christ is preached than everything else. Now, I'm staggered by that. As I say, it goes against the grain. It is more imperative that Jesus Christ tops everything.

[19:35] That's why I think this is a brilliant letter. Absolutely brilliant letter. Aren't you staggered by Paul's focus on the gospel? Not on himself, not on his circumstances. He's chained up in prisons.

He writes this. He wants to know that Christ is proclaimed. Outcomes matter. Outcomes matter. Jesus meant everything to Paul. And therefore, he would have meant everything to the Philippians. And by reading it, he should mean everything to us. They must keep making Christ known. So must we. They face persecution from certain overzealous Jews, plus some internal divisions, which you'll see in the letter.

But they kept going. So must we. So must we. Even as Paul gets near the end, in verses 19 and 20 in this chapter, he talks about his departure.

We don't know if that's his departure from prison, or his departure from this life into glory. But the lifting up of Christ is more important to him. And that's why he gets to a crescendo in chapter 1, which is why I want you to grab back the next few verses.

[20 : 48] For when you get to verse 21, don't you just love it? For to me, says Paul, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Who writes that other than a true believer in Jesus Christ? It's absolutely brilliant, isn't it? This is a crescendo.

To me, to live is Christ. Yes, of course it is. But to die is even better. Whoever says that? Only a believer. It's brilliant, isn't it? It's absolutely brilliant.

Could you say the same? For me to live is Christ? To die is gain? Is Christ above all for you? All Paul's reasoning in this letter, all his thinking, all the logic of partnership, all the progress, is due to his clarity about Christ.

That's what I wanted to get to this morning. Jesus Christ, sin bearer, death defier, life giver, was front and centre in Paul's thinking and living.

[22 : 02] And so it should be for me and for you. Chapter 2 will tell us all about the humility of Christ because that humility should propel us towards partnership and progress.

in fact, the reason why in verse 27 we strive together as one for the faith of the gospel, we walk worthy of the gospel, not being frightened of any opposition, is because of our partnership with Christ and with Paul, found here in the scriptures, and with our fellow gospelers.

We're in it together, brothers and sisters. Would you agree that you can't follow Christ solo? We need one another. We need our Bibles to see how the apostles acted and operated.

We need to encourage one another and to pray for one another. But above all, above all, we need Christ. Don't we? Let's pray together. Our Father, we are so, so thankful for our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son and our Rescuer.

To be shown grace and to discover peace is an absolute joy. We are delighted to be on your team. And we thank you for the privilege of working in partnership with fellow believers from all over the world.

[23 : 31] Thank you for gospel progress, often hard, often slow in this country, but making good progress in Nepal and Ukraine. Please help us to help one another.

To strive together as one for the faith of the gospel. Please help our love to abound more and more as we grow in knowledge and depth of insight. And please help us to discern what is best, to be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

Fill us, we pray, with the fruit of righteousness to the glory and praise of God. Amen.