

Gospel Partnership

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[0:00] So let's turn back to Philippians, and we're going to spend some time here. So we've been thinking about the house that Jesus builds, thinking about what it looks like as we have the life of God in the life of the church.

And that takes us to this wonderful phrase that we find at the beginning of Philippians, partnership in the gospel. So let me read just the first six verses for us.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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.

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.

[1:08] Amen. So when we come to this passage, we're coming actually to one of my favorite phrases that Paul uses. He uses it here in his letter to the Philippians. It's the idea of gospel partnership.

Partnership. It's a really rich idea, actually, because it contains within it the idea of fellowship. Here are a people, a group of Christians bound together in the cause of Christ, spreading his good news. But it also contains within it the idea of generosity. God has graced these Christians, and that grace is now being worked out in sacrificial commitment to other believers.

And, of course, it also has the idea of partnership. Here are a group brought together, working together in a common gospel cause with a shared gospel goal.

Gospel partnership is a really rich phrase. That's one of my favorite phrases that Paul uses. That led me to think. Apologies for people who haven't read Lord of the Rings, but gospel partnership took me down.

[2:12] The Lord of the Rings rabbit hole. It's one of my favorite books to reread because it captures so helpful, I think, so many of the ideals of friendship and fellowship. You find a group who are brought together on a shared quest.

They are bound together in this wonderful fellowship that is marked by sacrifice and commitment, as well as genuine friendship. Let me give you one snippet as we begin.

This is Mary, one of the hobbits. So this is early on in the tale. Some of the hobbits have just discovered that Frodo has been told by Gandalf he's got the job to go to Mordor to destroy the ring. And Mary says this to his friend Frodo. You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin, to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours closer than you can keep it yourself. But you can't trust us to let you face trouble alone and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo. Anyway, there it is. We know most of what Gandalf told you.

[3:15] We know a good deal about the ring. We are horribly afraid. But we are coming with you or following you like hounds. There's a great picture of true fellowship. And this fellowship will bring comfort and joy to Frodo and indeed to each of the members of the fellowship of the ring.

And what we see in a still more profound way is the sense of joy and comfort that Paul has as he thinks about this church in Philippi, this church that he helped to plant as he sees their ongoing gospel commitment.

So we're going to see a model for us in Philippi that we can learn from. And we're going to ask three very simple questions about gospel partnership. And the first is this, who is involved in gospel partnership.

Let me read verses 1 and 2 again. Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Just to very briefly remind ourselves that about 10 years earlier, and you can read about this in Acts chapter 16, Paul arrives in the city and he plants a church.

[4:29] He meets Lydia, a wealthy businesswoman praying by a riverside. Then there is the servant girl, dramatically transformed from demon possession.

And then there is the jailer who is saved from suicide. And they become part of this early church that meets in Lydia's home. But this is now 10 years on. But what's abundantly clear is Paul really loves this church.

I look at chapter 4, verse 1, to see how he describes them. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown stand firm in the Lord.

He loves them. It is joy and crown church. And the letter is full of a joy that Paul has in Jesus. But the letter is also marked with the joy that Paul has in his friends.

And just as a wee, this is almost like a trailer, because early in 2027 as a church, we're going to read and study together the letter of Philippians. Think about joy in Jesus.

[5:32] Our students are already ahead of us because they're doing that in their discipleship groups. But here is Paul 10 years on, and he's able to reflect on 10 years of faithful gospel partnership.

But who's involved in this gospel partnership? Well, back to verse 1. Verse 2, people mentioned are Paul and Timothy, these servants of Christ Jesus. So here they are. They're church planting missionaries.

We know that about them. We know that Paul is called by Jesus to be an apostle, to speak for him. And they describe themselves as servants of Jesus. It's a significant image you could use, the word slave.

Paul always understands that he has been set free from an old master, the old master of sin that held him in chains. And he's been set free, not to live as he pleased, but to serve his new master, Christ Jesus.

And Paul and Timothy, they will serve Jesus as they share the gospel. So they're involved in gospel partnership. And they're involved in this gospel partnership with all God's holy people who are in Christ Jesus in Philippi.

[6:36] To all the saints is how it can often be translated. And that's not the idea that there is within the church some kind of special elite. Oh, yeah, there's the leaders there.

They're the saints. This is the normal way that Paul describes Christians. To be holy or to be a saint is to be set apart by God and to be set apart for God.

And so they're involved in gospel partnership. And then he mentions together with the overseers and deacons. So this is him speaking about church elders and deacons. And the question is asked, well, why do they get the special mention?

And it's possibly just to highlight the fact that this is the group who are responsible for organizing the special collection that Paul talks about at the end of the letter that he's really thankful for.

But the point to see is that every Christian is brought into gospel partnership. So whether it's the church planter, whether it's the elder or the deacon, or whether it's the Christian church member, all of them sharing this together.

[7:39] We could put it another way. Everyone who shares grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ is involved in gospel partnership. To receive God's grace, that free, spontaneous, unmerited love of God to us as sinners binds us together to Jesus and to his people.

To receive this peace that Paul speaks about and that Peter spoke about in Acts chapter 10. To be reconciled to be reconciled to God by God's grace through the work of Jesus Christ.

That binds us to Jesus and to our brothers and sisters in partnership. So for us, if we're a Christian here today, the question isn't to ask, I wonder if I'm included in gospel partnership.

No, rather it's to presume that we are and then to ask, how will I live out the reality of gospel partnership? But here is Paul and he's giving thanks.

You know, he's separated by geography, maybe 450, maybe 600 miles away. Separated by circumstances, he's in chains for the gospel.

[8:44] They're enjoying freedom. But he knows there is this bond. They are united in gospel partnership. So that's who's involved. And we'll see some of what that looks like shortly.

But at this stage, just to think about, we're trying to think about this, a fair amount here as a local church. What's our vision? What is it that we want to be as a people? And we want to be, by God's grace, worshipping Jesus together, growing as family together, and loving our city together.

And each of these are part of what gospel partnership looks like in a local context. And we're all, as Christians, called into it.

So that's who's involved. The next question to ask is, how does Paul feel about gospel partnership? Let's just dig into how he feels.

Again, before we get into our text, just to go back to our other Lord of the Rings for a moment, to think about the friendship of Sam and Frodo, which, in my view, is one of the great friendships in all of literature.

[9:55] They are together, come what may. So there's the moment where Sam speaks to Frodo. You know, things are getting really hard. Frodo's kind of falling into a little bit of despair. And Sam wants to encourage him by reminding him of his devotion.

He says, I made a promise, Mr. Frodo, a promise. Don't you leave him, Samwise Gamgee. And I don't mean to. And then there's the moment, as Frodo is coming towards the end of the quest, and they're coming towards Mount Doom, and Frodo turns to Sam.

And he says, I'm glad you're here with me, here at the end of all things, Sam. It's a wonderful friendship that is committed, come what may. And it's the kind of friendship that Paul is receiving from these Christians in Philippi.

That while he is in chains for Christ, there is this wonderful light, and there's this wonderful comfort that comes as he considers his friends who are faithful towards him in the gospel.

So what does he say in his introductory words? How does he feel about this gospel partnership he shares? Look at verse 3. I thank my God every time I remember you.

[11:12] So one of the things that's really important, and we'll see this when we look at Philippians over a few months, this is not a perfect church. None of the New Testament letters are written to perfect churches because no perfect church exists.

One of the things bubbling under the surface, I think, in Philippi are these signs of division. It comes to the fore in chapter 4. But what Paul does, and he does this so often in his letters, he chooses first to put on the glasses of the gospel, to sharpen his vision, to make sure he is thankful to God for these brothers and sisters in Christ.

So he is thankful every time he remembers them. He is thankful for what he's seen of God's work in them. And he's thankful for their ongoing participation in God's work with him.

He is thankful for this commitment that is real and practical. He is thankful as he prays for them. But as we'll see, part of his thankfulness is also that he knows they are praying for him.

It's a partnership that's rooted in prayer. So he's really thankful for them, and he's really joyful as he thinks about them. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel.

[12:41] It's almost like air going into a balloon, and it's causing it to expand. Paul's heart expands as he gives himself the time to think about the reality of the gospel partnership that he is in with these other Christians.

He's bursting with joy. Maybe like proud new parents, bursting with joy. Ten years of standing together, of seeing their commitment to Jesus and to the man who planted their church gives him a sense of deep joy.

Paul has this laser-like gospel focus on God's grace that's able to put to one side the issues that he needs to address in their life, in their church fellowship, to focus on what is good.

I was reminded this week of a pastor who makes it his practice to keep a journal of what he calls wonderful things that God has done. So whenever he is aware, for example, of God answering prayer, it goes in the journal.

When he sees examples of God working in or through a person, it goes in the journal. As he hears God speak in his word, that goes in the journal. And he says he does this to promote his contentment, his thankfulness, his joy in his local church.

[14:09] What a wonderful pattern for any of us as Christians to when we think about other brothers and sisters. As much as we might think, oh man, there's so much that I would love to

correct or change.

Where can we be thankful as we see God's work in their lives? So he's thankful, he's joyful. And notice in verse six, that he is confident.

Being confident of this, he says, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

So what's happening here is as he's reflecting on the evidence of gospel partnership, as he's reflecting on the work of the gospel in their lives, he sees the gospel is bearing fruit.

They're signs of spiritual life. And so he trusts that this is a true work of God. And he believes that what God starts in a person's heart, God finishes.

[15:15] He can look at them and he can say, well, I know that God has begun to redeem you and to renew you. And I am certain that on the day Jesus returns, that work of redemption and renewal will be completed.

On the day of Christ's return, when he comes to judge, when he comes to establish the new heavens and the new earth, when final salvation is brought in for the people of God, he is confident because he sees God's work in their lives.

Thankful, joyful, and confident. Two things by way of application. For our own prayers, depending how we are temperamentally, it can be easy to perhaps feel down about church.

It can be easy, perhaps, to be down on other Christians. It can be easy sometimes to find faults. But Paul would encourage us to look at people through the lens of the gospel and learn first and primarily to give thanks for every evidence that we see of God working in another person's life.

that we would cultivate our own joy as we would consider what God is doing all around us if we would lift our eyes and look.

[16:45] That's what Paul's able to do. And it really fills his prayers with joy because of it. So here's something for our prayers, but something also for our gospel confidence.

Because what Paul wants to remind us of, and he wants to remind the Philippians of, is that salvation rests in the work of God from beginning to end.

What God starts, God must finish. God cannot fail to be faithful and to follow through. And so when our faith is in Jesus, and when there is evidence of our life bearing fruit, then we are invited to have assurance, to have that kind of confidence, to have confidence as a church, as we see God's work in the lives of one another.

So like Paul with the Philippians, this is the kind of thankful joy that God, I think, wants to cultivate in all of our hearts as we look around and as we share life together in our local churches and as we partner in the mission of Jesus, to have joy that we don't have to do it by ourselves, rather to have joy in our gospel partnership.

Here's the third question that we'll ask this evening is this, what does gospel partnership look like?

[18:14] So I'm going to suggest there's a few examples in the book of Philippians, and we'll look at some, but there's many more. But just to think about the diversity for a moment. Again, just to go back, within Lord of the Rings, you've got this very different group who are brought together in a common cause.

You've got a bunch of hobbits, you've got an elf, you've got a dwarf, you've got some others. And as the story goes on and as their friendships develop, as their partnerships develop, you see different examples everywhere.

So sometimes one person will share their precious supply of food with another, or sometimes one will share a horse with another. We find them fighting to protect a friend from an enemy.

We find a chap called Boromir sacrificing his life to save a couple of hobbits. We hear Sam with his brilliant line about the ring, I cannot carry the ring for you, but I can carry you.

And any sort of friendship, any partnership will be full of lots and lots of different ways that that's going to look. And so while we can find three examples of gospel partnership here in the book of Philippians, we don't want in any way to restrict it and to say, well, the only way that we can cooperate together is these three ways.

[19:32] This is just almost to enable us to see it in action, but there's lots of other ways that we can put this into practice. But here's the first thing for us to notice, and it actually takes us to chapter four, that gospel partnership is practical.

So if you look at chapter four, Chris read for us from verse 14 to verse 20, which gives us one of the reasons why Paul writes.

Paul is writing, one reason is to say thank you for the financial support that he has received on his mission. He is writing to say thank you that they have helped to meet his needs.

Verse 14, it was good of you to share in my troubles. Verse 18, I have received full payment and have more than enough now that I've received the gifts you sent. So he's thankful for these gifts. He's thankful because it's part of their consistent pattern. Generosity is part of who they are. Verse 15, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only.

[20 : 48] For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. So they are given the gospel. Here is Paul, the pastor of the church planter, and he's giving them the good news, but he's receiving from them.

He's receiving support when they're in his city and then when he moves to another city. And he's thankful for this practical expression of their partnership because it shows an act of worship.

Look how verse 18 ends. These gifts are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. So imagine his joy.

You know, here is Paul. He's locked away in prison. He's not free to do what he wants to do. He still gets to share the gospel and that gives him joy.

And then think about the moment when Epaphroditus comes through the door. Because when Epaphroditus comes, you know, Paul is grateful for the money, but more than that, he's grateful for the money as an expression of their loving concern for him.

[21 : 55] But it's a reminder that partnership is practical. You know, God calls us as Christians to steward our money well. God calls us to steward our money for the sake of his mission.

He calls us to use our money like the Philippians to bless and to encourage others and to enable the work of the gospel to go forward. So practically, when we think about gospel partnership as we see it in Philippi, there's an encouragement to us to examine our own bank statements and our bank balances, to ask ourselves, is this same kind of regular sacrificial giving something that I am participating in?

You know, maybe for a local church and maybe for a church worker, maybe for gospel partners, maybe just to show hospitality. But what we see is that gospel partnership is practical.

Another aspect of gospel partnership we find here is that it is prayerful. So on the one hand, verse 4, we have all of Paul's prayers for all of you.

He is a man of prayer. He's consistently praying for them. But then if you look at verse 18 into verse 19, he says, Yes, and I will continue to rejoice for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

[23 : 23] So Paul is in prison and while he's in prison, he's still doing mission. He's found this new sphere for his mission among the prison guards. And he's told them just a few verses before how much he loves when Jesus Christ is preached.

And as he thinks about the joy of Christ being preached, that leads him to think about the prospect of his release from prison to be able to continue a more wide-ranging ministry.

And that brings him to verse 19. It brings him to give thanks for their prayer. And notice that Paul depends on two sources of help.

It's through the prayers of God's people and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus that he has this confidence that what has happened to him will turn out for his deliverance.

And I think those two things connect because we can well imagine the Christians in Philippi praying, Father, send your Spirit to support Paul in his weakness and in his chains.

[24 : 32] Father, send your Spirit to provide for him everything he needs so he will remain faithful and be full of joy in Jesus, your Son.

Paul prays for them. And Paul is glad to acknowledge that he depends on their prayers for him. So again, as we think practically ourselves about gospel partnership, is this a feature of our own prayer life?

Are we praying regularly for those who are in our church family? Are we praying that others would know the help, the support, the provision of the Holy Spirit in their workplace, in their studies, in their relationships, in their struggles, in their circumstances, and as they share the gospel?

Is that something that we can do together? Clearly, the Philippians were praying together and Paul was aware of it.

One of the reasons why we have prayer in our community groups, one of the reasons why we gather for Engine Room every fortnight is so that we can pray together as an expression of gospel

partnership.

[25 : 47] And here's another thing. Paul is so full of joy and thankfulness for these Christians in part because he knows they pray for him. And I wonder when we pray for someone, can we go that step further and let them know by way of encouraging them?

I had that this week. It's a wonderful uplift just to hear someone say, I was praying for you this week. Can we do that for one another as part of our gospel partnership? So gospel partnership, it's practical, it's prayerful, and then finally, it is personal.

And that takes us to chapter 2 and verse 25 to 30 in the story of Epaphroditus. Look at verse 25, the way that Paul speaks about this man.

He is my brother, co-worker, and fellow soldier. He really honors him. And in verse 29, he says to the church, listen, welcome this guy Epaphroditus back into your fellowship with real joy.

And so the question is why? What's been going on in Epaphroditus' life? Well, he is the guy who's been tasked with bringing the financial gift and no doubt the loving good wishes of the church to Paul.

[27 : 05] And this has been an incredibly difficult journey. So he's either traveled, depending where Paul is in prison, he's either gone 450 miles or he's gone 600 miles.

So either way, it's a really long way. And while he's on that journey, he's gotten seriously ill. In fact, Paul says he nearly died. But why he's on the journey is what matters.

He's on the journey because he is doing the work of Christ. Look at verse 29, welcome him in the Lord with great joy and honor people like him because he almost died for the work of Christ.

He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me. Of course, the whole church couldn't make that trip. But Epaphroditus says, I personally will go at a great risk, risk to his health, leaving everything behind to do the work of Christ, to be a source of encouragement to Paul. It's a wonderful example of personal, practical, and no doubt prayerful commitment to someone else in the cause of Christ.

[28 : 18] So again, just for us to think about this, when we think about our commitment to gospel partnership, when we describe it in these terms, are we personally invested?

Are we sacrificially giving and serving in the cause of Christ? What does our use of time reveal about our priorities?

Gospel partnership is a wonderful thing, but it obviously requires much work, practical, prayerful, personal. Of course, it's important for us to recognize reasons that we have to be thankful for gospel partnership whenever we see it.

And there's lots of examples of that within our own church. It's to remind ourselves so that we can be encouraged and encourage one another who are involved. Think about the people who teach our children, the people who are upstairs teaching our teams.

Think about the people who make time to pray together for church, those who practice hospitality regularly, maybe to welcome people who are new, maybe to welcome students, those who serve tea and coffee to allow friendship and fellowship to grow deeper.

[29 : 30] Think about our elders and our deacons, giving up so much of their time to care pastorally and practically for church members and their needs. So many women within our church who are visiting the elderly and the unwell and who are bringing meals and offering friendship.

In so many ways, it's really encouraging to see people serving and welcoming, actively looking to meet needs, whether that's really visible or whether it's much quieter.

The partnership in the gospel, it's a beautiful thing, but it's a costly thing. Let me leave you with three thoughts about gospel partnership as we close.

Firstly, put the gospel at the center. I think that's the really important thing. That's why it's gospel partnership and not just partnership. We remind ourselves that we are united by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit.

They're working us, binding us together. We work together in order to put God's love in the gospel on display. We put the gospel at the center because we exist to share and to show the love of Jesus to ourselves and to our watching world.

[30 : 49] So we need to put the gospel at the center whenever we're thinking about any kind of gospel partnership. Secondly, let's follow the example we find here to pray for gospel partnership to grow within this church or the church that you belong to.

For church members to be bound closer to one another as we are bound closer to Jesus. Let's pray that others would be drawn in to feel that this is a home where they can belong and a place where they can also serve.

So put the gospel at the center, pray for gospel partnership and finally participate sacrificially and joyfully. It's the pattern that we have both from the Philippians and from Paul.

And what we see is that when we do that we'll bring others thankfulness and joy. And when we do that well it's part of our worship for God also. I thank my God every time I remember you and 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.

Let me pray for us this name. Lord our God we thank you for this letter that gives us such a lovely insight into the relationship between a church planter and a pastor and his church over the course of long years and over faithful service together.

[32 : 27] And Lord we pray that that is what you would cultivate here within our church and other local churches that we are connected with. And Lord we pray that our churches would be centered on the gospel that what would bind us together would be nothing less than the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we pray that you would bind gospel churches more closely together so that the light of the Lord Jesus and his love would shine more brightly in us and be a source of encouragement and strength to one another.

And Lord we pray that you would enable all of our church members to be participating with joy and with sacrifice in the cause of Christ. Lord we thank you for the great privilege of being called into your kingdom.

The privilege of having the treasure of the gospel in our own jars of clay. And we pray that we be faithful stewards of the gospel and we be faithful stewards of our resources and our time.

Enable us we pray to build one another up as we would share Christ together and give us opportunities even in this coming week to share Jesus with others we pray.

[33 : 42] In Jesus name. Amen.