

# God does his work

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[0:00] deliver that news and in person to deliver gifts.! And you can imagine this man making this long journey with those gifts.

And when he had arrived, he obviously spends a significant amount of time with Paul. And I'm sure that they would have spent many hours talking together about the people that they mutually knew and about the state of the church in Philippi.

And this letter that we have in the Bible of Philippians is like a return letter from Paul to the Philippian church. Where he's saying to them, thank you so much.

Thank you so much for sending Epaphroditus. Thank you for those lovely gifts. They were just what I needed. It was such a timely thing that you did for me. And thank you for all those stories that have come back to me now.

And so we have this blessing of a return letter. Paul has much more to say to them. And you just see how the little seed of good things, which was put into the heart of the Philippian church, that they said to this man of Epaphroditus, do you know what?

[1:40] We want to spare you for this. We want you to undertake this ministry. Travelling four and a half thousand miles at that period of time would not have been an easy thing to do, would it?

It would be quite a dangerous thing to do. But he did it and he went and the church spared him for such ministry. Isn't it good when people are able to come and tell us personally about situations? I remember when Mano came over from Sri Lanka and he was able to tell us things about the Sri Lankan situation that you could not possibly really grasp just from a letter.

Just being able to have the person there and to see the body language in a way and to sense his heart and to ask further questions.

And I think that was the lovely blessing that Paul enjoyed as he got to know the Philippian church afresh through Epaphroditus. Because he did have personal history, Paul had a remarkable experience ten years before, which we read about in the book of Acts.

[2:58] So you can see on the screen to the right hand side is the land of Turkey. By the way, that's where Victor and Eudic are living at this time. So Paul and his companions, Silas and Luke, they find themselves completely constrained.

They feel that God has been calling them to minister in this area here or maybe up there. But they're constrained. They keep on being pushed westward, westward, westward. And they get to Troas here, which is a port.

And at this particular point, Paul has the vision of the man of Macedonia. Macedonia up here. And say, come and help us.

Come over and help us. And they conclude that the Holy Spirit is in this. And they make that journey. They go to the port of Neapolis here. And then onwards inland to Philippi.

And what an incredible experience that was. I think as we read that passage again this morning, just to sense how they just went forward, not knowing quite what God had in mind for them there.

[4:07] And they see God's remarkable work. Firstly, we're told about Lydia and how the Lord opened her heart. And then it appears a whole household.

And then things turn very ugly in a spiritual way. They're arrested. They're flogged. Thrown into prison. The inner cell.

And then that extraordinary experience at midnight. As they're singing to the Lord. And an earthquake occurs.

And the jailer and his whole family are brought to a place of utter need. What must I do to be saved? And Paul experienced those things.

They were absolutely seared upon his heart memory, weren't they? Just as it would be for any of us who had the privilege of being involved in something like that. And so we come to this letter.

[5:06] And it's a singing letter. It's a singing letter. One commentator has said, Paul's experience in Philippi was singing in the prison cell at midnight.

And as he writes this letter, he's singing. He's still singing even though he's in a difficult situation. He's probably under house arrest in Rome at this time.

But it's a letter which is full of the word joy. Did you notice that as we read chapter one together? The word joy just keeps on occurring. And later on in the letter, the word rejoice.

Rejoice. I say it again. Rejoice. A singing letter. And we read of that joy which seems to flood his prayers.

So that in chapter one and verse four, he says, In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy. It's interesting just to pause at that point and think, Oh, that's a very interesting aspect of prayer.

[6:13] That our prayer for people should be filled with joy. As we remember them, it appears that Paul did so with a deep sense of joy.

And that joy was rekindled every time he had joyful partnering for them. Because the Philippian people were such a faithful bunch toward him.

Later on in the letter, he says in chapter four, 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 the matter of giving and receiving, except you only.

They weren't a strong church. But they always wanted to do what they could for this apostle who had planted the gospel in their midst.

For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. It's great.

[7:24] They were very consistent in their giving towards Paul. And here, ten years on, they're still giving towards him. They're still thinking about him. It reminded me of the giving that we make as a church to mission causes.

And many of those giving situations go back at least ten years or so. And it's a very healthy thing that we should give in that consistent manner so that those who receive that gift should know that we're partnering with them in the gospel.

That's what our giving is about. We're partnering in the gospel in some way. We don't want the gospel to be hindered, restricted by lack of finance. What a joyful thing it was to hear from Victor and Judith when they received our money and they said, do you know, that just covers our rent for 2019 in Turkey.

I thought, oh, what a blessing. You know, that's just a relief for them. They brought that before the Lord in their prayers. And we were able to do what we were able to do in joyful partnering.

And we remember them with joy. They receive our gift. They remember us with joy. And this is how the Christian life works, how fellowship works amongst us.

[8:49] And so when Paul prays for them, he prays with this exuberant joy. But it's not an unrealistic praying.

It's not as if he has inappropriate expectations about the Philippian people. He knows very well the many situations of difficulty and trouble that they are, have faced and will definitely face.

So I've listed five there that are found here in this letter. Chapter 1, verse 29 and 30. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.

Since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had and now hear that I still have. Very soon after the gospel came to Philippi, there was persecution.

There was spiritual conflict going on. Hence the prison. They didn't call that upon themselves. It was just something that happened as an outflow of the gospel.

[10:04] And it appears that the Philippians were likely, the Philippian Christians were likely to carry on suffering in this way and such persecution.

And we may well have to suffer such things ourselves. So how would you feel if two Brighton policemen came to your door on Tuesday evening of this week with a piece of paper and said to you, I want you to sign this please.

The piece of paper says this. Originally you did not really understand Christianity, but now you have a more comprehensive understanding of religious belief and your own spiritual need.

You have decided from today no longer to attend Christian activities and no longer to believe in Christianity. So that's Tuesday evening and they come on your door and they say you need to sign this.

Otherwise, there are going to be severe consequences. So that's what's happening. In a province in China now. Right now.

[11:33] Christian believers are facing exactly that sort of statement that they are being forced to sign. Otherwise they will go to prison. This is the suffering and persecution that God's people face in every generation.

And there's worldliness. And this is a worldliness that seems to be lapping at the doors of the church.

Chapter 3, verse 18. As I have often told you before and now say again, even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Their destiny is destruction. Their God is their stomach and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. And I think he's having to warn them because this is a very near temptation.

A very near problem to them. It's interesting he says here, I've told you before, often, and now say again, even with tears.

[12:42] even with tears. See now, this is a real risk that you face inside the church that you should find your love for the Lord Jesus growing cold and being supplanted by selfishness and things that have to do with this life only.

Paul also has something to say about quarrelling. So he introduces this in chapter 2, verse 2.

And he says, make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. And this isn't just a formula, but it's in the context of a reality which is found in chapter 4, verse 2, where he pleads with the Aodia and I plead with Siddhika to agree with each other in the Lord.

It's a bold thing to put it in a letter, isn't it, in that way? To identify these two people and say, look, there's been a falling out here. It's very, very important that you get this sorted.

To agree with each other in the Lord. So one of the Christmas letters we received was from a couple who have experienced a bad church split in the last year.

[14:19] There was no hint of it in previous communications, but this year something happened and they didn't go into the detail of it, but behind most church splits and difficulties somewhere other lies personality.

Maybe Aodia and Syntyche. Two Christian people who are falling out and cannot find a way to have a restored relationship.

Do not know how to be forgiving towards each other. And Paul says, be so careful of this issue of quarrelling. He would know.

He would know that this quarrelling could lead to the split of the church in Philippi. And then we come on to the question of anxiety.

which looks like a soft target. Anxiety. Chapter 4, verse 6.

[15:35] Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your request to God. Anxiousness seems such an innocuous issue almost, but it can become a cancer that robs a Christian of all his or her peace and joy.

Dear brothers and sisters, if you're suffering from this anxiousness, it's become your habit to be anxious. Please receive the word of Philippians 4, verse 6.

Do not be anxious, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, make your request to God to leave it in God's hands. Or you will find that your peace and your joy has drained away.

Or there can be changed circumstances. chapter 4, verse 12, Paul says this, I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty.

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

[16:59] I have learned the secret it was something he had to work out, something he had to develop in his understanding, something he may have tripped up on in the past.

But he said, well, I have now learned the secret of what it is to be content in every situation.

Changed circumstances can be times of spiritual opportunity but can also be dangerous times when we become disoriented and out of routine or confused.

Do you remember in the book of Job? Job was a very wealthy man and he had everything. He had an abundant family, many, many flocks, well-respected and so on.

Satan comes to God and says, does Job fear God for nothing. In other words, I don't think his relationship with God is based upon sincerity and truth but it is more based upon the fact that he has all these good things.

Let's see what happens if those good things are taken away well we know what happens because the whole book unfolds that in the end and we see the integrity that was found in Job at the end but it's a fair question isn't it it's a fair question for any one of us if we are found suddenly in a different situation where is our trust, where is our confidence or are we going to be really disoriented a changed job becoming a parent, being bereaved sickness reading the story of George Whitefield the last few days, George Whitefield was a most gifted and blessed evangelist he's 25 years old and for the last three or four years he has had remarkable success in his ministry tens of thousands of people come to hear him every time he stands up to speak the gospel and he speaks the gospel four or five times every day

[19:44] God blesses him not just in his ability to do that not just in his ability as it appears to draw these vast crowds of people remember this is 18th century England with the population as it was at that time but the fact that there are significant numbers of people who are being converted by the Holy Spirit of God under that ministry when he leaves the pulpit places and of course the churches are not big enough to hold the crowds that want to hear so he's out in the fields and the crowds keep following him and he has no time to himself at all everybody's wanting to talk with him everybody's wanting to share their soul situation with him how can I be saved what must I do to be saved like the Philippine jailer they're saying and this goes on day after day after day and the Lord gives him strength so after this fantastic ministry he goes to America and he's on board a sailing boat for 11 weeks with just the crew and 8 people 8 other people who are making the same journey the crowds have gone and in this sudden moment of absolute difference he is so convicted about his own sinfulness his own pride to such an extent that he feels that he doesn't want to preach the gospel again because he's completely unworthy to do it it was a kind of shattering experience but a very very helpful experience for him as he was put in a different situation and was forced to look at himself in a way that his previous life hadn't allowed him changed circumstances can be an opportunity but there can also be a threat and Paul is not unrealistic about these

Philippian Christians he doesn't put them on a pedestal he knows the troubles that they're facing the difficulties that they face yet he prays with absolute joy concerning them Paul is genuinely joyful and this verse tells us why 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 this is one of those verses that's very good to learn by heart to take encouragement from his joy is built on confidence and his confidence is built on the work of God the word here is very strong it's an absolute conviction you can depend on this he refuses to let the tone of his prayers be dictated by weakness and sinfulness doubt and temptation even failure and falling and we can see plenty of that in ourselves and others but he will always have the tone of his prayers set by the reality of the mighty inflexible unchangeable and overwhelming purpose and power of God

I don't want to draw four things from this particular verse he who began a good work in you Paul is of course referring to God but he leaves it rather open as to whether he's ascribing this to God the Father or another person for Trinity perhaps this is helpful for us for it reminds us that God's beginning work in a person can be rightly identified with God the Father with God the Son and God the Holy Spirit there would be no beginning work in us if God the Father had not chosen us before the foundation of the world there would be no beginning work in us if God the Son in obedience to his Father had not left heaven become a man lived a righteous life died a substitutionary death been vindicated by resurrection and is now interceding for us in heaven on the basis of his finished work on earth there would be no beginning work in us if on the basis of the work of God the Father had not sent the

Spirit into the world to convince the world of sin and righteousness and judgment to come to make the dead soul live and undertake the miracle of the new birth Paul would never forget how God had met with him on that day on the road to Damascus and he was changed forever or how the Lord had opened Lydia's heart or humbled the jailer the Paphroditus will have told Paul of many such stories and to be a Christian is to have our story of God beginning a work in us whether it's dramatic or not and I think it's significant and interesting that in those two stories that we have in Acts about Philippian people who became Christians we have on the one hand

Lydia who was a believer in God on the Sabbath day she's found by the riverside doing what believers in God did but as Paul and Silas gently opened the word to her and to the others the Lord opened her heart there was something fresh something new something powerful that took place within her life but what a contrast to the Philippian jailer and here's this man who's been hardened by years of being involved in that prison work who's got no background at all but it's quite clear that God does a remarkable work in that person's life so that he cries out what must I do to be saved and then

[26:52] Paul has to open up the word to explain to him so we have this spectrum of experience but it is the truth that every Christian person and I hope you can all say amen to this in your own spirit can say God has begun a work in me God began a work in me I'm not what I once was something has changed something is different and this is the work of God I was blind said that man in the gospels but now I see you can see the signs of spiritual life others can see it so Paul says if any man is in

Christ he's a new creation the old is gone the new has come this is God's work and this is why Paul is confident in his joyful praying because God began this work it's to his glory and praise and because this is 100% God's work it will surely succeed if I was responsible for 0.0001% of my Christian beginning there would be a most fatal flaw which would bring the whole affair crashing to the ground but praise God that's not the case it's God who's begun his work in all his people this is the bedrock reality for every

Christian and it's 100% due to God God a good work has begun it has a beginning but the work of God is much bigger than just a beginning just as a child is more than a baby and a man or a woman greater than a child we look at the baby we rightly say what kind of person will this baby grow to be we know that it will take time it's not the work of a few days or weeks it's the work of a lifetime and so God's work in us is only begun at new birth the seed is sown a start is made but it is just a start so Paul would say to Epaphroditus what about Lydia how is she doing and my good friend the jailer and his wife and children and he would be disappointed if all Epaphroditus could say was to remind Paul of their spiritual babyhood no he'd be keen to hear how they'd gone on how they'd grown how they testified how they triumphed over temptation how they'd proven God in their lives perhaps had been martyred for Christ how was this good work of God working out in their lives where is Christ likeness where is the fruit of the spirit which is why Paul prays in chapter 1 verses 10 and 11 my prayer that you may be able to discern what is best and be pure and blameless until the day of Christ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God and

I believe that Paul was so joyful because by and large and taking the long term view there was repeated evidence of God's work in the lives of the Philippian Christians there were blips and there were setbacks but pastors have to take the long view you can't be forever getting your children to stand against the height chart in their bedroom but every so often you say let's have a look my word you're growing in the third letter of John verse four he says this rather lovely phrase praise I have

no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth I did this little exercise in respect of you dear people in my heart and head over the last couple of weeks and

[32:17] I was encouraged in my spirit I was encouraged in my spirit to sense what God has been doing in your hearts and some of the development of his work in your lives and it's right and it's necessary and it's appropriate for us to be able to do that every so often how are you growing where is the fruit how is your service God will complete what he's begun because what God starts he finishes unlike us this rather pathetic illustration came to my mind when I was thinking about this issue of how often we don't finish what we begun

I remember taking a bike to bits with the full intention of putting it back together again it seemed so easy at the time you know you just take the bits apart and they just all fall apart then you look at this mess on the ground and you haven't got a clue how to begin to put it together again so that was about 35 years ago the parts are no longer the ambition was there but it just drained away has God ever started anything he doesn't finish perfectly that's a good question isn't it can you think of anything that God has started he doesn't finish perfectly not at all so it is with every Christian God is 100% on your case he was in 2018 and he will be in 2019 he doesn't get bored or disillusioned with his workmanship in any of his children he doesn't move on to something or someone more promising he doesn't forget about you I was having a hospital test this week several times I was left to myself for a period of time and I just began to wonder have they forgotten about me unlike our heavenly father from all eternity he knew not only you but what he had in mind for you and he is determined to bring that to his perfect completion by a 24 7 and personal attention to your particular situation

I want to speak a word here to those of us who are older the western world is obsessed with youth and older people can believe themselves to be surplus and a burden especially as health fails and energy fades the church of Jesus Christ should never reflect that but it's easy for the thought to lodge you're not surplus you're not a burden to God he's intensely at work in you in this stage of your life some of his finest craftsmanship awaits those in their 80s and 90s I heard in recent weeks of a Christian lady in her 90s she's 95 who is finishing her earthly course so well despite discouraging and upsetting circumstances the peace of God is keeping her heart and mind in Christ Jesus owed to end well like her this is God's intention for all of us until the day of Christ Jesus do you notice that word there verse six there until the day of Christ Jesus God has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus Christ you might think that God's work in us is completed on the day of our dying in Philippians chapter one Paul seems to be comparing the possibility of either living or dying and that certainly is a solemn step and a stage but Paul looks beyond that point in this verse and speaks about God completing his work in us until the day of Jesus Christ and this refers to that day when Jesus Christ will return to this earth not in weakness and frailty as a baby but as a king, a conqueror and a judge and on that day and not before that day the church of Jesus Christ will be complete 100% complete 100% perfected all gathered in none left straggling all gathered in the church of Christ will not be complete until then nor in a very real sense will we be complete without the completion of the church of Jesus Christ and on that day and not before that day every Christian will receive a new body like the glorious body of the Lord Jesus Christ there is only one glorified body in heaven now and it belongs to Jesus Christ but on that day all Christ's people receive their resurrection bodies we shall not be complete we shall not be complete until then and on that day and not before that day every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord as Paul reminds the Philippians in chapter 2 the reign and rule of Jesus Christ is not manifestly openly declared until that day when he will make all things new and usher in a new heaven and a new earth in which dwell righteousness and if God has begun and is working you then he will complete it and you'll be found on that day with great joy clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ expressing the fullness of the perfection of God's work which he intends for all of his children so rejoice because God has a wonderful way of overwhelming turning aside the dark sinfulness of our lives the weakness and frailty of our habits where sin abounded grace did much more abound

[40:35] I'd have loved to have eavesdropped on Paul's joyful prayers for the Philippians how would he have prayed for the church of Jesus Christ at Calvary I think he would have prayed with equal joy equal joy and we

too should pray for one another with such joy knowing that he who has begun a good work in us will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ Amen we've got two great songs to sing a good ending ending a good ending ending a good ending ending ending!

a good ending! a good ending ending