

A Shared Confidence

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[0 : 00] The reading for us today is from the letter of Paul to the Philippians and as you can see on the screen it's found on page 1179 in the Church Bibles.

The letter to the Philippians from Paul, beginning chapter 1, verse 1. Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi with the overseers and deacons, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always, in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all because I hold you in my heart.

For you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

[1 : 23] And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent and so 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.

Thanks, Fiona, very much for reading for us. Please do keep Philippians open and let me pray as we begin.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed that all scripture is God-breathed and therefore that as we hear the Bible read and proclaimed, that actually we are hearing the words, the breathed out words of the living God by your spirit.

And we pray therefore, please would you grant us humble hearts and minds this morning to receive your words, such that we might be transformed by what you say to us.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, it's been an amazing summer for British and English sports. Cam Norrie getting to the semifinals of Wimbledon.

[2 : 52] Katie Bolter and Liam Brodie getting to the third round for the first time. In the football, the women winning the final, defeating Germany 2-1. And at the Commonwealth Games, a total of 57 gold medals and 176 in total, beating our previous record.

Now, I don't know about you, but I always find the interviews afterwards absolutely fascinating. So, you know, here are athletes. They are completely at the top of their game. They're going so well. And yet there's no sense of kind of sitting on their laurels or putting their feet up. There's the desire to get even better. You know, they're talking about their training schedule tomorrow and the next day and the next day.

The next event. All for the glory of winning whatever it is they're trying to win. But here's the question. What do you say to a church that's going well?

Well done. Rest on your laurels. Well, we're starting this new series of sermons today in Philippians. A letter written by the Apostle Paul, probably in 61 AD.

[4 : 01] And in many ways, it is a church that is going really, really well. I wonder if you notice how it starts. As Fiona read it to us, have a look again at verse 3. How it starts with thanks.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you. Starting with joy, verse 4. Always in every prayer of mine for you. Making my prayer with joy.

And yet, it's a not rest on your laurels letter. It is a stand firm letter. That's the theme which dominates the very heart of the letter.

Just flick over the page. The heart of the letter really runs, and we'll see this over the next few weeks. It's from chapter 1, verse 27, to chapter 4, verse 1. And the heart of the letter begins and

ends with this idea of standing firm.

So you can see it there in 1, 27. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

[5 : 09] And then this central section finishes, chapter 4, verse 1. Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm thus in the Lord.

So what is it the Holy Spirit is going to be saying to us at Grace Church over these next few weeks? A church which, in God's kindness, in so many ways is going well, and there's much to give thanks for.

Rest on your laurels. Pat yourselves on the back. No. Stand firm. It's why it's such an important letter for us to be looking at through the autumn.

It raises vital questions as we continue to seek to kind of recover, so to speak, from COVID. Vital questions about the kind of church that we want to be.

And not just the kind of church corporately we want to be, but the kind of individuals we want to be. All of us. Garrett, Joy, Isabel, Francis.

[6 : 12] The kind of individuals we all want to be. So then what is the issue? That's our first point this morning. What's the issue? Belonging.

Have a look at verses 1 and 2. Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, were the overseers and deacons, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, in many ways, this is the standard way in which the Apostle Paul begins his letters. It's to all the saints. It simply means those who are trusting in Jesus. And at Philippi, we read about what happened the first time the Apostle Paul went to Philippi in Acts chapter 16.

It was the first time the message of Jesus, the first time the gospel came to Europe, the first church that was planted in Europe. But notice the way that these Christian believers are described, how they are simultaneously in Christ and at Philippi.

Now, that is true of everyone who follows the Lord Jesus Christ. In him, in Christ, and yet at wherever we live, in Dulwich or Hernhill or whatever.

[7 : 32] And yet it was particularly significant for the church in Philippi because it was a city with a famous past and a privileged presence. It had a famous past that had been the scene of a decisive battle in which the Roman armies loyal to Julius Caesar had defeated the rebel forces of generals Brutus and Cassius.

And to honor that event, Philippi was given what was known as the Italic Rite. It became a Roman colony. If you lived in Rome, even though it was in Greece, you had Roman citizenship.

The style and architecture of Rome were extensively copied. The Latin language was used. The Roman legal system was used. Their coins bore Latin inscriptions.

Its citizens wore Roman dress. Philippi is a privileged, high-status city. Just keep a finger in Philippi, in Philippians, and turn back to Acts chapter 16.

Acts chapter 16. Perhaps someone can call out the page number when they get there. Acts chapter 16. 1-1-1-4.

[8 : 46] Right. Marcus, you win the Mars bar. 1-1-1-4. And here in Acts chapter 16, where Luke writing Acts, he captures something of this feel of Philippi when Paul first went there.

Have a look at chapter 16, verses 11 and 12, where Luke notes Philippi's status as a Roman colony. Verse 11. So, setting sail from Trias, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, and a Roman colony.

We remained in this city some days. Well, I'll let you read on in Acts chapter 16 later, but we read the gospel was preached, a church was started, a businesswoman named Lydia, and a household were the first people to be baptized.

But then, as is so often the case in the book of Acts, opposition comes. And when you notice what the objections are, verses 20 and 21. And when they brought them to the magistrates, they said, these men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city.

They advocate customs that are not lawful for us, as Romans to accept. What's more, later on in chapter 17, in Thessalonica, just down the road, a very similar thing happens.

[10:11] The opposition drags some of the Christians before the city authorities, in chapter 17, verses 6 and 7, and see what they are shouting. These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they're all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus.

Can you begin to see the issue? Can you begin to feel the tension if you are a follower of Jesus in Philippi? It's not Roman to be Christian.

You're not preaching our values. You worship Jesus, not the emperor. Do you see how it's an issue of belonging?

I wonder what defines you most, if you're here this morning, as a follower of Jesus Christ. Is it the fact that you are in Christ?

Or is it the fact that you are at Dulwich, or wherever it is, or the job that you do, or your background, or your reputation, or many of the other things that could define us?

[11:29] Which king do you ultimately give your loyalty and allegiance to? To King Jesus? Or to Caesar? Or whatever it is that your family, or culture, or friends, or work colleagues expect us to be loyal to?

Because to be a follower of Jesus Christ anywhere in the world means, very simply, that we don't belong here. It's why, again, when we get to the very heart of the letter, there's not only the command to stand firm, but also a reminder that our first allegiance, if we belong to Jesus, is to him. Flick on to Philippians chapter 1, verse 27. As Paul says, Philippians 1, 27, only let your manner of life, literally your citizenship, be worthy of the gospel of Christ.

And at the end of the key central section, in 3.20, but our citizenship is in heaven. Or perhaps we can already begin to see why this letter is going to be so relevant for us.

After all, if you lived in Philippi, and if you have moved to live in Philippi, your mother would quickly be telling all her friends, they've moved to Philippi, you know.

[12:53] I guess somewhat like Dulwich. And when your friends, who you haven't seen for a while, perhaps, ask you where you're now living, you find it rather hard not to feel somewhat smug.

Oh, we live in Philippi. Rather like Dulwich. And when colleagues ask you where you live, and you tell them it's Philippi, they look at you approvingly, the assumption being, you've made it.

Rather like Dulwich. Philippi, a privileged, high status place, just as this place in which we live is. Now may I say, if you're here this morning, and you are looking in on the Christian faith, belonging to Jesus Christ is a huge joy, and a massive privilege. And we long that Isabel and Francis would come to know that for themselves.

And they would be absolutely convinced in their own minds of that. And yet there is a cost that we don't belong here. And we long as well that Isabel and Francis will know that cost for themselves.

[14:03] Now we'll see more of that cost over the next few weeks. So do keep coming. Of course, for those of us who do belong to Jesus, he is wanting us to ask very deep questions.

Where do you really, really belong? Not the answer which we give on a Sunday, but the Monday through Friday answer.

Where functionally do you belong? What determines the life choices you make? And when you're forced to choose, perhaps when your status or your privileges or your reputation are under threat, what really matters to you?

What's the issue? Belonging. Secondly, what is the mark of belonging? Well, partnership. In other words, how do we know that our primary allegiance is to the Lord Jesus?

Well, it's what Paul calls here, partnership in the gospel. In verse 3, it's what Paul is so full of thanks for. In verse 4, it's what fills him with joy. It's because, verse 5, of your partnership in the gospel.

[15:18] And the partnership word is there again in verse 7. It's right for me to feel this way about you all because you are all partakers, literally partners with me of grace. And notice for you the logic of verse 6.

It's precisely because of their partnership in the gospel that Paul can say he is sure that God has begun a good work in them and will bring it to completion on the day of Christ. It's their gospel partnership that demonstrates that their primary allegiance is not to Philippi or to Rome, but to the Lord Jesus.

So then, what is partnership in the gospel? In the Greek word, it is, in the Greek, it's the word *koinonia*, a word that is often translated as fellowship.

And yet, I don't know if you agree with me on this, it seems to me we have managed to almost completely emasculate the meaning of that word. You know, we might invite people to stay on for a cup of tea or coffee after the service and time of fellowship or come away on our day away next Saturday.

And have some fellowship together. In other words, we kind of reduce the word fellowship to meeting up with friends and having a nice chat. We've made it, if I can put it like this, into something which is limp and weedy.

[16:37] Whereas, in the New Testament, it is very much a shared partnership in a joint project. It's actually a business word.

It's dynamic. It's gutsy. It's front foot. It is energetic. A partner in a city law firm will put up tens of thousands of pounds into the business and then together with other partners in the law firm, they'll be working in a single-minded way together towards their shared goal.

Well, likewise, partnership in the gospel is to work together in the gospel together, serving Jesus together. May I ask us as Grace Church Dulwich, is this how we see ourselves?

In other words, do we simply see ourselves as individuals who attend or perhaps if we're part of a family group, as a family who attends? Or actually, do we see ourselves corporately together in this joint venture of gospel partnership serving the Lord Jesus together?

Now, we'll build a much fuller picture of what gospel partnership looks like as we go through the letter, but notice that immediately in verse 7 we can see three components of it. Firstly, these Philippians have been partners with Paul in his imprisonment.

[18:12] I guess they could have backed away from Paul at that point. After all, they were Roman citizens. To stand with Paul might have put their reputation at risk, but they stand with him.

Second, Paul has defended the truth about Jesus in the public domain and once again, the Philippians, I guess they could have backed off. They could have been tempted to distance themselves from Paul and think to themselves, well, that's not quite our kind of Christianity.

But no, they stood firm. And thirdly, Paul has confirmed the truth about Jesus by showing emperors and governors and religious leaders the evidence for the gospel that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And again, the Philippians might have been tempted to back off. Well, you know, we're Roman citizens. This doesn't feel very Roman. We'll leave that kind of thing to Paul. We'll just keep our heads down. But no, they stood with him.

And for Paul, the fact that they did so is a cause of great joy as he writes to this church. I imagine many of us in fact know something of that joy for ourselves.

[19:20] Perhaps you've led Sunday Club and some of those kind of seven-year-olds or eight-year-olds. You know, they're now six feet tall and they're at school and yet wonderfully they are standing firm for the gospel, wanting to make Jesus known.

Or perhaps you've taught our youth group, JAM, and they're now off at university, some of them, and it's such a joy to hear them partnering with others in the gospel. Or perhaps at school or at work, it's a joy to be in gospel partnership with others, sharing the same goal together, praying together for that same goal of making Jesus known.

And it hasn't been wonderfully encouraging over the summer to have three of our mission partners visit us from Ireland, from Italy, and Zambia and to hear of how their gospel ministry, seeking to make Jesus known, is going costly there that is.

This is the mark then of belonging to Jesus Christ, partnership in the gospel together. The New Testament knows nothing of the individual Christian or the individual family on their own serving Jesus.

The mark of belonging is partnership in the gospel. And to the extent that we too are gospel partners as individuals and as a church, that I take it we can have enormous confidence as Paul does here that we are on track with God.

[20:46] But of course it does mean, doesn't it, there's a flip side. It follows that actually if this outward mark of gospel partnership is missing in our lives, then we need to ask ourselves questions, deep questions about where we really belong.

So what's the issue? Belonging. What's the mark of belonging? Partnership. What's the goal of partnership? Well, the day of Christ.

The return of the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of history. Verse 6, it's there, isn't it? The day of Christ Jesus. It's the goal towards which God is at work in us. And in verse 10, it's the goal that we

are to have firmly fixed in our sights.

People often say, don't they, if you're preparing for a wedding or you're involved in preparations for a wedding, people often say something like, well, we really want to make it their day. Well, the future day when the Lord Jesus returns at the end of history will be his day.

When he'll be seen by all as the victorious Lord and King that he is. When his work of rescuing people for himself from every tribe and every nation and every language will be seen in its full glory and splendor.

[22 : 09] So then, how do we make that our goal such that we are effective gospel partners? Well, this prayer shows us, verse 9, and it's my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment.

Love, notice, not so much in affection for others. Rather, he's talking about what we love, as in, what we value, what's important to us.

Love that's informed and trained by knowledge and discernment. Perhaps if you have a garden or a window box or something and you're growing something and it needs training, perhaps those tomatoes, you have to train them, or the raspberries, you have to train so they don't just sprawl along the ground.

Well, in the same way, this is a prayer not only that we'd grow in love but grow in love for the right things. In other words, that what we love, what we are, what we desire will be trained and directed so that, verse 10, you may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

It's a prayer for excellence, not the idolatry of perfectionism which of course is really only serving ourselves but rather that we'd be able to distinguish, that's why we need knowledge and discernment, the really important issues in our lives and make the right decisions as those who first and foremost belong to Jesus.

[23 : 39] Don't you need that kind of discernment to make the right decisions, good decisions, as those who first and foremost belong to Jesus? I know that I do. Such that we'd be a pure, verse 10, talking about purity in the inner person, blameless before others, talking about outward behavior.

And then verse 11, a life filled with a fruit of righteousness that comes from Jesus as we see his work in us brought to completion. On the day away, next Saturday, it's wonderful that so many of us are going, we'll be surrounded by apple orchards and it's a wonderful time to be there, the most glorious harvest, an abundantly fruitful time of the year.

Don't we want that for our lives? Don't we want that as a church to be abundantly fruitful, a glorious harvest? after all, life is full of decisions, isn't it?

Life's full of big decisions. Life's full of small decisions. Some of those decisions, both the big ones and the small ones, they set a course for our lives.

They set us on a trajectory. If they're wise decisions, they can liberate us wonderfully to serve the Lord Jesus. they can open up opportunities to serve him and partner with others in the gospel.

[25 : 11] But if they're unwise decisions, they can make that so much harder and gradually we drift away from gospel partnership with others. We may still attend church, but it will be as individuals and not as partners.

I don't know about you, but I find just these first few verses of Philipians and indeed the whole book an extraordinary combination of both.

It's wonderfully encouraging, but it's also profoundly challenging. If for anything like me, it's all too easy to be content with being just a kind of a bit of a loving Christian or making choices which are kind of generally okay.

okay, well, at least they're not sinful, they're kind of okay, and to be content with some fruit in my life. In other words, as I pray this, I'm very conscious of the tension that comes from knowing that I'm both in Christ and in Dulwich.

I feel the pull of, on the one hand, wanting to be like everyone around me, I feel the cost of being a gospel partner, and then, on the other hand, so conscious that I'm in Christ.

[26 : 30] And that is why we need to pray the focus of this prayer would be our focus because, of course, the danger is that we simply live for today rather than that future day. And that would be a tragedy, wouldn't it, if we were simply living for today because, actually, it would mean that in our heart of hearts, we really belong here and not to Jesus.

So let's pray this prayer. Let's pray this prayer for ourselves, for others, for those in our new growth groups. The Lord Jesus is on his way.

Let's pray that we'd be ready for him. If our citizenship is in heaven, shouldn't that be the very day that we long for, the day that our eyes and focus are set upon, that our longings and loves, that our decisions, that the direction of our lives would be focused on bringing glory to him and praise to him on that day.

Let me give us a few moments for reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer. to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for the extraordinary privilege of being in Christ Jesus and of belonging to him and knowing to him and knowing him, knowing that he is Lord, knowing that he is on his way returning at the end of history.

[28 : 01] and yet we are so conscious that we live here as well and we're so conscious of the enormous temptation to set our sights on living here and to have our decisions guided by being citizens of this world rather than of heaven.

And we pray, therefore, Heavenly Father, in our great weakness, please would you help us to be those who rejoice in the Lord Jesus who look forward to his coming.

We long that the things we love would be directed and shaped such that we would make wise, godly decisions as gospel partners together at Grace Church.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.