

An Introduction to Philippians

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Preacher: Simon Jones

[0 : 0 0] with the overseers and servants, grace to you and peace from our God, our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will...

...to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the tender affections of Jesus Christ. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight, to help you to determine what really matters, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

So that we get a sense of the dynamic movement of Paul's thinking rather than rather static.

So apologies if it was slightly different. I read from the newly revised standard version, the one we tend to use at college. So I'm going to risk taking my first layer of warmth off.

[1 : 4 8] That's because I've been standing down here by a heater. If anybody is really cold, this heater is on. You can come and huddle around it and share warmth. Now, if I press this, does something happen?

There's a question mark. I suppose it helps if I switch it on. It always helps if you switch it on. Right. Whee! So in my previous church, we celebrated our 150th birthday by throwing a party in Bromley North Hyde Street with lots of stalls and we bought lots of food from the local restaurants and gave it away to people who came.

All sorts of stuff was going on. And a half thousand people came and were entertained and blessed and we had lots of fantastic conversations. In the course of the whole day, we created this picture of the front of the church building.

This started off as just a sort of outline with every bit of colour stripped from a big picture by our partner from Frames and Arts.

And it was just an outline of the bricks. And we had just invited people to colour in a brick and contribute to the creation of a picture of the building where the church gathered.

[3 : 0 9] Now, at the end of the day, as I was going round paying the bills, we had to pay all the restaurateurs who'd cooked for us through the day. So I was going round with wads of notes, handing money over to various restaurant people.

I came across a lady who was standing looking in the window of Frames and Arts, which is the art supply shop that's kind of worked with us through the day.

And she was looking at the painting. And I thought, this is too good an opportunity to miss. So I kind of sidled up next to her. And I began to explain to her what the painting was and how it was created.

And she said, yes, I know. Because she had been one of the people who, that afternoon, used a paintbrush and coloured in three or four bricks.

And she began to talk to me at that point about her life, about her struggle with alcohol and isolation, and how for the afternoon that she'd been at the street park, she had felt part of something.

[4 : 16] She'd felt part of a community where people actually cared about. She had enormous conversations with people about life, the universe and everything. Now, she wouldn't have had those conversations if we hadn't been on the high street.

She wouldn't have come to our building to have those conversations because she wasn't that kind of person. For the afternoon, she felt as though she was part of something bigger. It made sense for a long time.

I have no idea where those conversations have led to in her life because she's no longer there. I don't know whether she has stepped up the conversations with the people that she met that day.

But lots of conversations happened as the painting was being created. And I love the painting. I made it the church logo for a few years because it seems to me it says everything there is to say about the church.

It's created by a vast number of hands. It's really messy. And it's gloriously unframed. But we didn't frame the picture because we had a long, long conversation about whether we should buy a big frame for that.

[5 : 21] We didn't frame it because it seems to me the church is not framed. It is free to leak out all over the place. And as I was thinking about Philippians, I think about Philippians quite a lot.

It was one of my favourite of Paul's letters. As I was thinking about Philippians, I'm thinking about what the painting tells me as an illustration of what Paul says at the beginning of Philippians 1.

It seems to me this picks up some themes that are really important for us as we think about who we are and what God has called us to and how God might speak to us through this great letter.

So Paul talks about being confident of completion. Now probably the only time that we've ever been confident of completion is when our lawyer has phoned us to say that we've not only exchanged contracts on the house that we're buying, but we have set a date for completion.

And of course we all know that that all goes smoothly. There's never any hitches along the way. When the date for completion is set, everybody works to it and nothing goes wrong.

[6 : 36] Nobody leaves the country at the last minute. Nobody discovers that they haven't got the money in their bank account that they thought they would have in their bank account and therefore they're not able to transfer. That happens.

Completion is set and it happens. And that's what Paul is confident of. He is confident that what has begun will be finished.

And he's confident in that, not because he's a really good theologian and evangelist, not because he's got a plan, not because he thinks the Philippians are particularly good at getting things done.

He is confident only in the fact that God has started something and what God has started, he will finish. Now notice that Paul doesn't say that God will rubber stamp every bright idea we've had as a church.

God does not promise to complete anything that we dream up on a wet Wednesday evening when we're at a bit of a loose end. That is not what Paul is talking about.

- [7 : 44] Paul is talking about what God has started, he will finish. Which is a reminder for us to focus on the things that really matter. And we'll come to that in a minute.
- So Paul paints a picture of us being the continuing work of God. That's the tenses in verse 5 and 6 that are particularly important.
- These are present continuous tenses. They're not future tenses, they're not past tenses. They're tenses that tell us that God is completing what he has started and he's completing it in the present.
- He's not kind of started with us, put us on the back burner for a century and we'll complete it when Jesus comes again. He's started something. He's started something.
- I haven't got it all taped. It means I haven't got it all worked out. I've got a few bright ideas about things, but I haven't got a complete picture.
- [9 : 12] I am still pressing on, as Paul will say in chapter 3 of Philippians, to become complete. This is the same word.
- It means complete or perfect. And in Philippians 3 verse 12 he says, I have not yet obtained this. I am pressing on to become perfect because that is the upward call of God in Christ Jesus on my life.
- But I'm still a work in progress. So the core stuff has been established. I know God loves me. I know Jesus died for me. I know the Holy Spirit is at work in me as well as in the world.
- That's the kind of core stuff that we all know about. But we each have so much to learn about what that actually means in our lives. There's a great old Baptist hymn.
- I'm really pleased we don't sing anymore because it is pretty ghastly. But it has the line in it. God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.
- [10 : 14] How many of you know that? There aren't any Baptists in the room then. Disappointing. It's in the old green Baptist hymn book. In our old church, Linda and my old church, when we first got married, we sang it quite a lot.
- Right? I've no idea. It is so unmemorable that the only line I remember is, the Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.
- Because this was a big Baptist mantra in the 17th century. We believed that we had been saved through hearing the gospel of Jesus.
- And now we were a work in progress. And the progress would happen as we read scripture together. Because the Lord had yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.
- So we're not finished. And this is a reminder that we really shouldn't get too full of ourselves. There's a fabulous Latin word to sum this up called superbia.
- [11 : 12] I think Skoda could well produce a car called the Superbia to go along with the Fabio and the other wonderful names that they have. But superbia means pride, basically.
- Superbia just means pride. We have a tendency to think that because we put our faith in Jesus and because we've been saved, we know it all now. When I was a young Christian, there was a trend for having big, bold, bright Dayglo posters on outside churches.
- Now, this all hates me, some of you. There were things like, help fight truth decay. Yeah, none of them were any better than that. But the one that really captured my imagination and made me think, was the big poster, green, with Dayglo orange writing?
- And it said, Jesus is the answer. Now, what's your question? And that struck me as being superbia in action. That's such an arrogant thing to say.
- It is a statement that says, we've got life taped. We understand everything. We are the people to come to in order to be told which way is up and how you should do everything.

[12 : 25] And I knew even at 16 that that poster was inaccurate. Because if the question was, where does the 27 bus go? The answer, as far as I knew, was Stonygate, the suburb of Leicester, not Jesus.

It is not the answer to all the questions that we might ask. It will help us to find the answers to the questions that we might ask. He is not actually the answer. Because we have to work out a whole load of stuff.

As we will see in Philippians chapter 2, we work out our salvation with fear and trembling. We need to sort out how this applies in our lives.

And that can sometimes be a bit of a struggle. And it just reminds us that we are not competent to do this for ourselves. See, if I've got everything sorted out, if just by putting my trust in Jesus meant everything had fallen into place, I would not need the grace of God every day to help me live the life that God is calling me to.

I would not need his power at work in my life because I have sufficient power of my own. And sometimes we can end up as people who are paused on the journey that God has called us on.

[13 : 33] We end up as people who have put our trust in Jesus and now we're just sitting back for when Jesus calls us home. And that's not what Paul is talking about at the beginning of Philippians.

I noticed that you've called your series on Philippians joy. I think Philippians is much, much more about struggle than it is about joy. And the joy that there is in Philippians is found in the struggle to be what God wants us to be.

For our identity to emerge as we work out with fear and trembling what it is God is calling us to be and to do in the world as we discover it.

And so there's a third thing that's really important in this section and that is community. Now hear me right when I say this. I don't believe in church.

I know the creeds tell me I'm supposed to believe in one holy, apostolic and Catholic church. I don't believe in church. Church is something I practice.

[14 : 36] Church is something I do. I can believe in Sainsbury's. I do believe in Sainsbury's. I drive past it fairly frequently. So I believe that Sainsbury's exists.

Sainsbury's is only useful to me if I pull off the road and go into the store and shop in it. Or I go online and I click through the products I want them to deliver to my home.

And the same is true of church. Church is not something we believe in so much as something we do. We practice. We come together in order that some of the things that Paul talks about here in Philippians 1 become true of us both as individuals and as a community.

So tenses again. All the yous in Philippians 1 are plural yous. Greek language has a different you for plural you, you collective, and for the singular you.

And they're all plural yous. All the verbs are plural verbs. You plural will do this, that and the other. This becomes incredibly important when we get to chapter 2.

[15 : 47] There are huge numbers of verbs, most of them difficult. But there are huge numbers of verbs. And they're all plural. They're all what we do together. Because church is something we do.

It is active. It is a practice. Hence the reason why Paul talks twice in this short section of partnership, or *coinonia*.

We are together, as a community of people, working this thing out. We are learning, in church, who we are, how to be reconciled to one another, how to live holy life, how to be the people God wants us to be.

And so this is the burden of Paul's prayer. In verses 9 to 11, again, all the yous and all the verbs are plural. This is about what happens when we gather together.

Not me in my small closet, praying that I'll be all the things Paul wants me to be. In Philippians 1, 9 to 11, it's us all together, struggling in prayer, to work this stuff out, so that we might be the people God calls us to be.

[17 : 03] And it all hinges on us loving, knowing, discerning, and determining what really matters. What really matters. The trouble is, we're often so besotted with the trivia of church life.

I've been besotted with the trivia of church life this morning. Will my PowerPoint work? No, it won't work. So three people have been working behind the scenes to make my PowerPoint work. Wow, big deal.

You know what church is about? Church about the music we sing? Some of it's okay. Some of it's absolutely dying. No, no, no. Today's was marvellous.

But, you know, sometimes I think, sometimes I'm in church or in a worship service at Spurgeons College. I think I've stumbled into the rehearsal room of a sub-coldplay pop band.

And it has all the spiritual intensity and out-of-date yoghurt. But we're very focused on it because, really, man. We're very focused on rotors. I know this because Linda sometimes tells me about rotors and who is and isn't on them.

[18 : 06] We're very focused on buildings. Goodness me, are we focused on buildings at the moment. When will this building be warm? How many layers should I wear to come to church? And sometimes, dare I say it, we're very focused on the ephemera of money.

All these things are kind of important. They're not what really matters. Paul would find them all completely baffling because in communities where he worshipped and taught people, none of those things went on.

They didn't have buildings. They didn't sing. They didn't have rotors for doing stuff. They just gathered and ate together and learned about Jesus. Yeah, it's very warm there.

But, of course, they didn't own the building where it was. So if it was warm or cold, they didn't kind of have a view. It was just the place where they were meeting at the time. We sometimes get very caught up in the ephemera of church life and I know that it's important that this stuff goes on.

But Paul prays that we will be able to determine and discern what really matters. The focus of his praying for his hearers.

[19 : 14] And that is why Paul talks about partnership. We are partners for the world. I love this picture. I can't remember where it came from. I love this picture because this is such a collection of misfits.

And I look at this picture and then I look out at this group and I think, yeah, this is such a collection of misfits. This is what God chooses to work with.

And this is who we are partners with. And we discover our identity as new beings in Christ as we work together to be church with one another.

We become the community reconciled to one another. Learning from each other how we apply the gospel to our daily lives.

Holding each other in prayer when we know that one of us has a difficult day ahead or a difficult week ahead.

[20 : 15] Holding them in prayer because we are partners with one another and supporting them in mission. We are partners with one another in order that others might hear the good news about Jesus.

What is the church for? The church is for the world. The church is for being a vehicle of the good news about Jesus.

People who haven't heard it. And people will hear it because they see in us something of the gospel being brought to life in the way we behave towards one another.

In the way we love one another. In the way we support one another. In the way we work together so that we might be blessed. So that the community around us might also be blessed.

So it's no wonder that Paul prays. Because Paul is seeking completion affection. God has taken what is shattered and broken and he is about making it perfect.

[21 : 23] He is about putting it all back together so that it is complete. That's what he's begun in each one of our lives. And he's begun it both individually and as a community of people.

It will happen in our lives because we are church as a practice. We get together and we pray for each other and we support each other and we help each other to live well in the world and we knock the edges off one another because we are reconciled together and we find each other difficult to be with.

God is making us complete. He is inviting us to play our part in his work making things complete. Will we? Is that what we are going to commit as we ask God to break more light and truth in his words in the Philippians and I pray that that will be so.

Amen.