

Paul's Prayers: Partake in God's Grace

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[0:00] Good morning. Again, welcome to any of you who maybe haven't been with us for a while, or if you might be visitors here for the first time.

We're continuing with a mini-series on prayer. They're Paul's prayers from three letters. The first one was from Ephesians, the second one was from Colossians, and this one's from Philippians. All three of those letters were written to churches in those various places while Paul was in prison. And in fact, there are a number of letters that Paul wrote that were written from prison. There are in fact, I don't know if you know this, but as many as seven. Ask our staff this the past week, because I didn't actually know, and they didn't either. And so now we all know that there are seven.

And so those three, Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, Philemon are four. But then also it's thought that 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus were also written while Paul was in prison.

[1:02] And so that's the context out of which these prayers are given in these three cases. They all come very early on in his letters. As I was reading over this, I was just struck.

You know how, when you think about this, Paul is in chains, but the point that's brought to bear in our life is that the gospel is unfettered. In this letter, Paul is in prison, but the grace of God is free. Paul is maybe in a house arrest. Maybe that's what the prison setting is like. But the mercy of God can't be contained to four walls. Paul may be with very few people in this prison setting, but the message of salvation is for the whole world.

And Paul, we get this glimpse kind of in one moment of time while he's in prison, but the defense and the proclamation of the word of God is until the end of the world, until the king returns.

And so this message really through and through is about that gospel that just cannot be contained in prison and is released throughout the world right up until the time that Jesus returns when we see him face to face.

[2:15] So in this trilogy, I guess it's kind of also about that grace of God that's sufficient for us until the return of the king. And that probably brings to mind Tolkien's trilogy of the Lord of the Rings and the return of the king.

But you'll see in a second how that actually theme comes through here. The title of this sermon is called Partaking in God's Grace. And when I first saw that before we launched in this series, I thought, you know, I'm not really sure that fits.

You know, one of the themes that comes through in this letter of Paul's is actually joy. He uses the word five times, which isn't a lot, but a lot more than he's used in his other letters. And in some of his letters, he never mentions that once.

We know with the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians that it starts out with love, joy, peace, patience.

You know, it's the second one in that list. So I thought it was about grace, but Dan really hit it on the head when he named this Partaking in God's Grace.

That's what it's about. And if I had to sum it up in these words, I'd say that this message, these verses from 3 to 11 are really about this prayer that where God shows the church back then and also now here in Vancouver, that his grace is sufficient to love us from now right up until we see the return of the king face to face.

[3:36] That God's grace is just that sufficient for our lives. It's sufficient for the life of Paul. It's sufficient for the life of those who are in Philippi. And it's sufficient for your and my life as well.

So let's take a look actually at this prayer. I'm easily divided up into three sections, three verses each. And so we look at the first three verses.

And I think if you'll turn there with me, that would be great. You can follow along on page 980. And the first thing I think that is brought to bear in our lives, and that is that God uses this prayer to show that his grace is sufficient for us so that we can give general thanks to him.

Paul begins this prayer and he ends it. It all begins and it ends with God. He says, I thank my God. That's right where he begins. That's where it all starts. And when you go to the end, well, that's where it ends too.

He says it's to the glory and praise of God, verse 11. But in these first three verses, it really begins with God. It's all about God. He says that I thank my God.

[4:42] So he starts with himself and what he does. But really through and through, it's about God. And sometimes we do have to admit that when we do come to God with prayer, sometimes it can be about us, right?

We bring to God our desires, our hopes, what it is that we want. And that's a right and good thing to do. He wants to know what it is that is on our hearts and our minds coming from our mouths.

Not that he doesn't already know it because he's all-knowing and he knows what it is that we're going to bring to him. But this is really how a general thanksgiving should begin. And that's what Paul is doing when he brings his prayer to God.

He goes straight to God. It begins with God. And then he expresses to God that he's thankful. He says, I thank my God and all my remembrance for you, always in every way of mine for you and making my prayer with joy.

And so then he begins to say what it is that he's thankful for, just in general terms. He doesn't kind of give a list. People who have kind of lists when they pray, and that's a good thing to do, but Paul doesn't have a list.

[5:46] There's just kind of one thing that he's thankful for, and he's thankful as he remembers the church in Philippi. That's what he's thankful for. He's thankful to God, in fact, for them.

And so he expresses that thanks to them, and he does it in, if you notice, in just kind of absolute and total and ultimate terms. Just listen to this. He says, I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine, for you all making my prayer with joy.

He's really kind of laying it on. You can just hear it there. If you compare it to the prayer in Colossians and Ephesians, he doesn't kind of lay on these absolutes. It's not kind of total. It isn't complete. Not that he isn't thankful for them.

That's the way he starts those prayers as well. But he really lavishes it out, that he's thankful to God for these people. And he really kind of wants them to get that across, just how thankful he is.

But it's not just that he is thankful, and that he's thankful with joy, filled with the joy of the Lord because of who they are, but the explanation for which he's thankful is really what he wants to bring to bear on their lives.

[6:51] Why is it that Paul is thankful? And so as we read on there in verse 5, the explanation is given to us, and he says this, that it is because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

That explains his thanksgiving. That's why he's so thankful for them, because they have this gospel, or this gospel has them, and they've been partakers in that. They've been sharers in that.

They've had fellowship in the gospel, and because of that, that is why they're thankful. And so, I think we see that God's grace is sufficient in our life to be thankful. Being thankful we don't do, because it's the polite thing, but I think that one of the things that Paul is showing us here is really that it's the right thing.

It's something that's generated by the good news. It's generated by the gospel of Jesus Christ, and sharing in that gospel together makes us generally thankful.

Right? And Paul has been sharing with the church in Philippi, first meeting outside the city walls of that great city of Philippi, and then coming into the city, meeting with them, praying with them, preaching, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, that gospel that he has shared with them, and they share with him, is his reason for generally giving thanks.

[8:08] They've shared resources with him. They've financed his ministry. And because of this, because they're partakers in this gospel, he can be generally thankful with joy. Sometimes I think that we know that we

should be more thankful, and we, excuse me, but we should on ourselves. You should do this. You should do that. Someone else should do this. They should do that. But one of the ways to be really thankful is just to be thankful for the gospel that's been entrusted to us because of Jesus Christ and his life and his death.

And Paul says that this has happened from the first day until now. The first day he knew them right up until this point. They continue to share in this and be thankful for one another. So that's the first thing, that God's grace is sufficient so that we can be generally thankful to him.

The second thing I think this prayer shows us is that the grace of God is sufficient so that we can all be partakers in that grace. I just love the hymn that we sung early, love God's love excelling.

Terry just picks great hymns for our worship and mourning here. And that's really what Paul is saying, just how excellent and excelling the love of God is. And so if you look at verse 6, in the beginning of 7, we see really what all nine of these verses are about.

[9:33] Paul goes on and he says that, I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus. Continues on and says, for you are all partakers of me with this grace.

That's where the title comes, this partakers with the church in Philippi, in this grace. That explains everything that goes before and everything that actually comes after this, from beginning to end. It's all about the grace of God. It's only by his grace that we have this faith and this hope and this love. But look at me just for a minute, what comes before this line where he says that we are all partakers with grace.

Why does he put that in there? What comes before that, that he wants the church to know, that God wants us to know that his grace is sufficient? And that is that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Christ.

God started a work in that church there. He started a work in those Christians' lives. He started a work in our lives, in our church here. And God starts a work in our life and he's going to bring it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

[10:46] That what he started, he will finish. I know maybe when you hear that, you think of Jesus as he's spiked to the Roman gibbet, right? And his last words from the cross were, it is finished, right?

And we think, yes, on the cross it was finished and for sure when he died on the cross, the work that he came to do here on earth was finished. But I wonder if you actually know that the words that he used when he said, it is finished, finished are the same words that a gladiator would use when he stood over his victim and finished him off.

It is finished. Victory. And for sure that's what Jesus was claiming. That's what he was declaring when he was on the cross. And it's just amazing when you think about that, right?

That here he is above and over the Roman soldiers, below him and everyone else, declaring victory. It is finished. But there is still a work that goes on.

As Jesus rises, he ascends into heaven and he continues this work from heaven above. That a work that he started, Paul says, that he will carry on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

[11:58] In this world, in his church, in Christians' lives, throughout the whole, all of creation, his work was started and will be brought to completion.

It will be finished in people's lives. And the way that happens is by God's grace. His grace is sufficient in yours and my life. And what I love about what Paul does here is he says this, that I am sure of this.

And then he said, it is right for me to feel this way. You just see the conviction and the clarity and the confidence of the apostle and the Lord Jesus Christ and the good news, how it's kind of accosted his life, gripped his life, brought to bear in his life in a way that nothing else ever could. And yesterday, in the Anglican tradition, and noted in the Book of Common Prayer in the calendar, was actually a feast. It was a red letter day.

I don't know if you know where the term red letters come from. They actually come from the Book of Common Prayer. And the holy days would be in red letters. Now they're in boldface.

[13:05] But the celebration yesterday was the conversion of St. Paul. And who other than St. Paul would actually know that that radical

transformation by the sufficiency of God's grace would be brought to bear in his life and turn him around.

Or if at least not turn him around on the road to Damascus, grip him in a way that then put him on the right path of following Jesus Christ, the one whom he was persecuting, the church whom he was persecuting.

And so Paul knows very well what this grace is like and that he wants to share and remind the church is sufficient to bring to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

I just want to read this prayer from the conversion of St. Paul for you. And as we're talking about prayer here this morning, as we're learning about Paul's prayer, this too is a great prayer to learn about just how important God's grace is in our life, how sufficient it is, how it brings about conversion in yours and my life and continues on from there.

Listen, this is, O God, who through the preaching of the blessed Apostle St. Paul has caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world. Grant, we beseech thee, that we, having this wonderful conversion in remembrance, may show forth our thankfulness unto thee for the same by following the holy doctrine which he taught through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

[14:33] It's a great prayer that reminds us of his conversion and our conversion as well that starts but actually keeps going on. And Paul isn't saying, you know, look, I want you to know this and listen to what I say, but not what I've actually experienced.

He's experienced this conversion firsthand and wants them to experience that as well. And so he says, for you all are partakers with me of this grace.

And he just continues to be very personal and very passionate. He's not detached. And sometimes he's been accused of that in other letters by other churches that, well, Paul, you know, he's really good in writing and on letters, but in person, you know, he doesn't really amount to very much.

But you would never get that impression, actually, as he lays on just how much he loves, just how much he cares for the church. And so he says, both in my imprisonment and defense of the confirmation of the gospel, for God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

His love for them, this grace that's been poured into his life is then poured into the life of the church as well. And up in verse seven, which is as similar, this is right for me to feel this way about you.

[15:42] Let me just kind of pause for a second and kind of linger over these two words, feeling and affection. I just think that it's great that he talks first about it is right for me to feel this way.

He doesn't say, I feel this way, and so it's right. He knows that it's right, and so he feels this way.

His feelings follow what he knows to be right, but the word feeling literally actually means to think.

It doesn't actually mean to feel. And so his thinking drives his feelings, as it were, and they're thoughts that are in his heart. I know that we know that the heart is often the seat of the will, but the heart is also the seat of our thoughts.

We think with our heart, and this is how he thinks about the church, and it is right for him to feel this way about them. This is this grace being poured through him, through, from God, through him to the church.

And then he says, I yearn for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. I just love this. We love to domesticate and tame the scripture. But in reality, this word actually means the bowels.

[16:51] That's what it literally means. It says that I yearn for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. From the gut, from that place that is deep within us, is how he just longs for the church.

You know, as I read this this past week, I thought to myself, Paul is so far from me. And I wish that I were more like this and realized how little I love others and love the church the way that Paul did.

So much do I want to be like this and share this just a little bit, only briefly with our Bible study. And then the next morning, I heard from Elmer and James and Tara about the death of their two-year-old son.

And I thought, well now here's an opportunity to see God's grace be sufficient in love and action.

And realize as this prayer begins that it's not about me, it's about God. And watch some of you and other people in that family then come around to support and love and be the grace of God in their life.

And I won't tell their story, I know that they'll be able to tell it in the future, but just to point out that God's grace is sufficient. It is enough. It's more than adequate to do what God desires to accomplish in people's life.

[18:09] And so we go to the last three verses now and we see what it is that God actually wants to accomplish. We've heard what Paul's petition here is and that God's grace is sufficient. It's sufficient so that we can be partakers together in that grace, but also that God wants us to grow.

That's the goal of the sufficiency of God's grace in our life. It's not just to kind of hold on to and hang on to, but God wants something to come about as a result of His grace being spread in our life personally and in the church.

And so we see in this that Paul begins then, he says, it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and discernment. He just wants their love to grow. There's this elasticity.

There's this organic and infinite dynamic to the love of God and he just wants their love to abound. You can just see it kind of building, right?

And sometimes, I mean, I know that God is love and that God is infinite, but do I know that His love bounds? That it's just beautiful, it's dynamic, it's just, it gets larger and larger.

[19:14] And, you know, I gather that God's love is a little bit like language or a foreign language, isn't it? We learn a foreign language and we know that if you don't use it, you lose it. But if you lose it, you know, you're always learning and it just builds and builds and builds.

Well, so too is the love of God. It just, as we love, we love more and more and more and more and if we don't love, it's like we love less and less and less and less.

Paul wants their love to build more and just, and just be boundless as it were. And there's a reason for that. There's a reason for that. And the reason he goes on to say is that you may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ filled with the fruit of righteousness. There are just four things here that he wants for the church. That they'd be excellent, pure, blameless, and righteous. Those four things worth pausing and looking at for a second. First, that they would be excellent actually means to be different.

There's something qualitatively different about Christians in the church. You know, that Jesus said that they'll know that you're my disciples for your love, for your love for one another.

[20:22] There's something different. Certainly there are things that are similar about Christians in the world and sometimes we come to the world, we may compliment or confirm what's going on but other times we'll critique it and say, no, that's not right. There's something qualitatively different, excellent, beautiful, good, right about those who are followers of Jesus because of this boundless love.

Secondly, they would be pure. This is kind of an internal quality, something that is achieved in our lives that cannot be achieved by ourselves but only brought about by Jesus Christ and his spirits in our life that brings about that transformation, this inner quality.

But not only would we have that inner quality but there's something outward to it again that we would be blameless, literally that we would cause no one to stumble. The only one that should cause anyone ever to stumble is Jesus who's the rock that makes men stumble and the, no, stumble and makes them fall, right?

That's not us but that's what it means to be blameless and when? All the way up until the day of Christ Jesus. And then finally there is the fruit of righteousness that we would be filled with.

All of us are filled with something. We fill our lives with a whole host of things, don't we? But the thing that we should really be filled with, what God wants us to be filled with because of this grace is the fruit of righteousness.

[21:42] That which is good and beautiful and true and lovely. And the one way that this comes about as it begins with God and ends with God is through Jesus Christ through his glory and praise.

And so God's grace is sufficient that we would grow in this way and in these terms. Some of us here this morning may feel like a little bit like Paul.

We're not in prison. Obviously not a literal prison. But we're in another kind of prison. Maybe it's a kind of a moral prison. Maybe it has to do with our marital status.

Maybe we wish that we had another spouse or we had a spouse. Or maybe it has to do with our stage in life. Or maybe it's our profession. Or maybe it's a relationship with someone else.

Some kind of prison where we just kind of get stuck. And we're there and we just wish that we could somehow get out of that. Well I think Paul's prayer and the sufficiency of God's grace shows that God can do in our lives that we can't do for ourselves.

[22:48] That we can actually be generally thankful because of this partnership that we have in the gospel. But not only that that we can be partakers with one another with this love of His that just gets lavished on our lives.

And that is enough. In fact it's more than enough. That it can bring about radical change in our lives. Maybe not our context like Paul's. It not. But something can change internally.

And sometimes relationally with others. But finally that we would keep growing. That we wouldn't become stagnant. That the Christian life that we know isn't just a kind of a isn't just kind of a snapshot but it's a moving picture.

And that we're moving in the direction of Jesus Christ. We're following right behind Him. As it were with Him before us and even Him behind us and Him beside us. And that's what God wants for us. And that we take to heart that His grace is sufficient through and through. In the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts to be acceptable to you. Oh Lord our rock and our redeemer.

[23:53] Genesis, the text of our heart reaching you to bewhich of the■■■■ you watch the Neil of the■■■■