

True Partnership

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[0:00] Well, let's return to Paul's letter to the Philippians.! Let's bow in prayer before we turn to the word.

Father in heaven, we ask and pray this evening that you would bless us and encourage us in the truth this night. Lord, it's a great privilege that we have to be able to open the Bible in front of us. And we need the light of your presence to guide us into what we need to see here. We dare not, Lord, progress, in fact, without that light.

And so may the Spirit guide us to the things of truth. And may we find blessing and joy in what we discover. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. You know, if there was two themes that you would say flow out of the letter to the Philippians, we've kind of touched on them both in all the different parts of the letter that we've read tonight.

[1:34] The obvious one is Paul's joy when he thinks about the church in Philippi. And in some ways, that's very often a rebuke to us because when we, I think, so often think about the church on earth, very often we think about all of the problems, we think about all of the things that make it difficult.

And joy is maybe rarely the first word that would spring to mind when we think about the church. But for Paul, joy was one of the great reasons for, or one of the great things of his thought and state when he was reflecting on the church and thought of them.

Connected to that is the reason for Paul's joy. And that again runs through this letter really clearly. It's not as clear in English actually when you're reading it, but if you're reading it in Greek, you would see it immediately because the same word crops up time and again, although it's translated in three different ways in the passages we've read.

And that is the fellowship of the church. The partnership of the church. The way in which the church share together in some experiences.

And my thinking tonight is to reflect a little bit on this. The way in which God has ordained for the church to have an experience of partnership or fellowship in its life.

[3:10] And this theology, it runs actually throughout the whole of the Bible. It goes back to the very beginning to creation when God created Adam. Adam, he said it's not good for Adam to be alone.

And he created a partner for him. Someone who would be alongside him. And who would fulfill a... In fact, I'm not even hesitant to say it, but it's a divine purpose. It is a purpose of God's own character that the wife that has provided for Adam is there to correspond to him and to work with him and to serve together in their lives as a whole.

And that design for fellowship and the core of what it means to be human is actually reflective of the character and nature of God himself.

God is... You know, the God we worship is not a... Is not a monad. It's not the same God as Islam worships.

[4:22] The God of Islam is alone. There is only one God. He has no son. He has his prophets. He has his servants. He has creatures that do his bidding.

But in Islam, God is not three persons. And our God is three persons. From before the foundation of the world, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have entered into a partnership for the work of salvation.

They've entered into a partnership and a sharing in the work of the atonement. They work in partnership in the work of creation.

They've worked in partnership in the work of revelation. There is even a partnership of the Trinity in the way in which we pray as followers of Jesus Christ.

And so this partnership, this sharing of work together, is reflective of the character of God himself. And it's so dangerous for us if we get into a habit of thinking about the Christian life where we can cut ourselves off or put ourselves into positions where we are isolated and alone.

[5:46] We need partnership. And we need that at a deep level, as we'll see, in some of the ways in which this works out. Obviously, there's a great danger as well.

Human partnerships are abused. Human partnerships have been abused from the very beginning. This morning, we were thinking about Noah.

It is interesting. Just after the story of Noah comes the story of the Tower of Babel where a group of humans come together and they say, let us build a tower that we can bring God down to us.

And there is a great wickedness in the scheme of the people of Babel. And God confounds that scheme and brings a judgment upon them of dividing up the people into languages and groups that scatter over the face of the earth.

And so sometimes human sin takes the good things that God has made and corrupts them and pollutes them for our own purposes.

[7:02] So Paul uses this idea of partnership, as I say, three times in the letter to the Philippians. The first of these, we've read it just this moment, in fact, in verse 5 of chapter 1, where Paul says that, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, I have been able to pray with joy.

Because of your partnership in the gospel, I have been able to pray with joy. The reason for Paul's joy is because they've participated with him in some of the work of the gospel.

The work of the gospel is itself that profound work of God himself, the bringing of good news into the experience of men and women in this world.

And Paul says that you have partnered with me in that work. It's been a missionary endeavor that goes on in the life and the experience of the church.

And Paul says of the Philippians, it's been my experience of you that this has been the case since the very beginning. Now, the beginning of the story of the Philippians is in the book of Acts.

[8:35] And you can read there about how in the book of Acts, Paul went on the Jewish Sabbath to a riverside outside the city to a place where a group of mostly women were meeting for prayer.

And there he met, among others, Lydia, whose heart God opened with the gospel. And from that day forward, Paul has said, the character of the Philippian church has been one that has shared in, shouldered with him, this work of the gospel.

So this is a church where from the very beginning of their story and consistently right the way through it, they've had a very clear purpose. They've had a clear sense of their identity.

They've bought into the idea that they are makers of disciples, that they are engaged in the work of bringing the good news into the lives of men and women, and they have been blessed and are continuing to be a blessing in this great work.

That's one of these things that we should think about for ourselves, isn't it?

[10:06] As we think about our identity as a congregation, as we think about what we are about, what we're for, as we think about it in terms of our families, because I hope that we would aspire to have families as part of the life of our congregation, what are our families for?

What are our homes for? What are our resources for? What has God blessed us with in our lives that we can use for his glory?

And how do we do this? And the answer of it ought to come back to this idea of partnership in the gospel. That is the good news of Jesus.

The good spiel. The good story that's there to be told. And that is the story of Jesus. Of the Redeemer's coming.

Of his life in this world. His ministry. But culminating, as Paul talks about, in that trajectory that takes him to the cross. Where he empties himself.

[11:16] Taking on the form of a servant and subjects himself even to the point of death itself. That is the good news tonight. That is there for each one of us.

That is the good news that we are invited into. When Calvin wrote about this in this passage, he says, We know how rare an excellence it is to follow God immediately upon his calling us and also to persevere steadily unto the end.

For many are slow and backward to obey, while there are still more that fall short through fickleness or inconsistency. And Paul says, Here is a church in Philippi that has not been inconsistent.

Here is a church in Philippi that has not been fickle in its support and unwavering care for the lost around about them. This is a church that remembers what it's for.

And sadly, in the New Testament, it's pretty clear that that's not always the case. It's possible for churches to lose sight of that somewhere along the way, to stray from that calling.

[12:37] But Paul is reminded of the Philippians, of their partnership in the gospel since the day of Lydia's conversion. And so we should be bold when we think about what we want as a church, especially as we move towards calling a pastor and how foundational that will be to the life of this church.

It's so important in the character of the church that we have. What do we want? A pastor who will lead us in the word and who will lead us in the work of the gospel, who will create and spurn on, as Paul did, a partnership in the gospel in our midst as a church.

And our prayer, maybe just now as well, as we think about that forthcoming vacancy meeting and as we think about the process that has to be followed, our prayer should be for a pastor who himself will be committed to that work of the gospel and who will see it flourish in this place.

So there is that first element of this partnership, that they are partners in the work of the gospel. But then if you turn over the page to Philippians chapter two, verse one, and we read there, so if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

So Paul is saying there that there are certain things that flow from the work of the gospel. Flowing from the work of the gospel, there is an encouragement in Christ, that is a comfort from love, the love of God that is shown to us in Christ Jesus, that is a participation.

[14:36] That same word is used for participation there. So in chapter one, he's talked about their partnership in the gospel. Now he talks about their participation in the spirit, and it's the same word in Greek.

So there is this working of God in the lives of these Christians in Philippi, which leads to Paul having a completed joy as they express a unity and a commitment and a love towards one another that overflows from their experience of the gospel.

And again, the notion here is that Paul is rejoicing. He says, complete my joy.

So there is an experience of joy already. And Paul is saying he wants that experience of joy that he's already had when he thinks about the Philippian church. He wants that to just overflow and grow as he remembers them and as he hears about them and as he hears of the work of God among them.

And he says, this comes from the Holy Spirit. This is the work of God, the Spirit, in our lives. And the result of it is that the church in Philippi will have this thing he calls a one-mindedness, that they would share a sense of duty and purpose and direction.

[16:10] But more than that, that they would share a sense of love and compassion for one another, that they would minister to one another out of their needs and in their times of sorrow and sadness, that they would experience this overflow of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

It's an astonishing thing. And he says, this thing, this one-mindedness, is in fact the mind of Christ. So he says, I want you to have this humility that counts others more significant than yourselves. Let each one of you look not only on his own interests, but on the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

And so the character of the church in Philippi, Paul is saying, is one that comes about because they are conformed to the likeness of Jesus. So the roughness, if you can think of it this way, the roughness of their character, perhaps it's their short-temperedness, perhaps it's their, perhaps it's their, maybe it's times of greed, of self-centeredness, of wanting things their own way, of insisting on their desires.

And sometimes these desires might not be wrong things, but insisting on them nonetheless. And Paul says, what he wants them to change to is away from that way of thinking about their lives and their purpose in this world to thinking like Christ.

[17:43] So he wants them to think like Jesus, who he goes on to explain in this really profound passage about the self-emptying of Jesus, the way he takes on the form of a servant and empties himself, becoming obedient to the point of death and suffering in this world.

And he says, that's the mind I want you to have. I want you to have a mind that is like Christ and that you are willing to suffer loss for the good and the blessing of your brothers and sisters. I don't want you to insist on your own way. I want you to serve them. And the prime example he uses of that is Jesus, who left the throne room of heaven and came into this world and who took on himself the form of a servant.

He didn't come as a prince in a palace. He didn't come as a king ruling armies. He didn't come as a mighty general exerting his will and forcing people to conform to his way.

He came as the Messiah. Messiah, who laid down his life for others, who poured himself out in ministry and in care for the lost people around him and the profound needs that he saw in their lives and ultimately gave his life as a sacrifice for many at the cross.

[19:11] And Paul says, a church that is characterized by partnership, a church that is characterized by this Greek word *koinonia*, is a church that has the mind of Christ where people outdo themselves, one another, to minister to the needs of those around them.

And what's fascinating is Paul says, you can't do that yourself. I want us to stop and think about that just now for a moment.

We can't do that ourselves. There is no amount of exertion that we can have, there is no amount of effort that we can put in that is going to change our fundamental character.

The truth is, if you are not a loving person, you will never be a loving person. And no amount of hypnosis and no amount of self-help and no amount of therapy is going to change that.

The world's tools do not change the essential character of sinners. But someone does. And that's why Paul says, I want you to have this participation, this partnership with the Holy Spirit.

[20:40] His prayer for the Philippian church is that they will move as the Spirit leads them. That they'll go on as the Spirit carries them and takes them forward.

There are wonderful illustrations of this once from John Piper. He was preaching and he was saying this participation in the Holy Spirit is like two military jets. You see them at air shows where you maybe see the red arrows or formation flying they call it.

And it's truly remarkable because the precision with which these hypersonic jets move is just incredible to watch. One of the jets turns this way and the other one turns as well and they move in parallel to one another and stay in formation.

And it's remarkable watching it. The amount of precision and the amount of synchronization that goes into it. It's the same thing as synchronized swimming in the Olympics where you see a team of athletes performing these intricate maneuvers in a pool of water which would terrify me to do by myself.

And yet they're there doing these things in absolute precision. Maybe half a dozen of them at once. Information in a pool of water. And when Paul talks about partnership in the Spirit that's what he's talking about.

[21:58] He's talking about us aligning ourselves to the guidance and the direction and the lead of the Holy Spirit who is saying this is the way in which we will go. And that involves obviously as Jesus had in his life that surrender to the will of the Father.

It's that Gethsemane experience where Jesus for our salvation looks into the cup that is before him and says nevertheless Father not my will but yours be done. And Paul's saying that same character that same desire needs to be ours daily as we think about what we're for.

As we think about who we're for. As we think about how we live and how we love and what we're about. that we surrender daily to the leading of the Holy Spirit and where that takes us is that place where we minister lovingly and sacrificially and fully to those around us.

Particularly our brothers and sisters in Christ. and so it's difficult for us because so often actually in our experience the drive the desire of our lives is to do almost the exact opposite.

It's really been the case since COVID and the pandemic did so much fundamental damage to the character of our communities to the character of volunteering.

[23:46] It eroded things away and we're having slowly to rebuild these things now a few years on. But we need more of it. We need the Holy Spirit to enable us to come away from our glorious isolation and to reintegrate into proper fellowship and life together.

For us to stir up true service without fear in one another's lives and to seek to minister the grace of God in Christ Jesus and the work of the gospel.

And so there is to be this participation this partnership in the Holy Spirit. There's a few things that flow from this.

Just some quick theological ideas that are really important for us to grasp. If ever somebody's asking you to say well you know what do you mean the Holy Spirit is a person?

Why is God a triune person? Why is God a trinity? This is one of the places where we go to. We can be assured the Holy Spirit is a person. You don't have a partnership with a force.

[25:03] You don't have a partnership with an energy field. You have a partnership with a person. And so where Paul says if there's any participation in the Spirit what he's talking about is the Spirit as a person interacting with us.

So we can be sure that the Spirit is a person here. But equally that there's a Spirit as a person as someone we can offend. As Paul says elsewhere in fact it's possible to grieve the Spirit because we don't want to work with him because we resist his call upon our lives because we want to go in a different direction and we say enough of it we don't want you.

And it's possible to grieve the Spirit and when we do that sometimes we will discover that for a season he might leave us alone. The Spirit might say well fine you do your own thing for a while and we'll see how you get on.

There's lessons for us to learn when that happens. There is this partnership as well where we work together with the Holy Spirit where the Spirit is the one leading but we are following clearly.

It's like we were thinking this morning about Noah when God showed him and told him how to build the ark. Moses is at pains to tell us Noah did all that the Lord commanded him. When Noah was told to put the animals into the ark and prepare for the flood Noah did all the things that the Lord commanded him.

[26:37] When Noah himself had to take his family into the ark and wait for God to close the door Noah did all that God commanded him. When it came time for Noah to come out of the ark Noah did all that God commanded him.

Our lives need to be characterized by that listening to the voice of the Lord and the Holy Spirit guiding and directing us and it applies to all of us as a church.

The final point is in verse 10 of chapter 3 the third time Paul uses the same word is when he's talking about his own salvation and his experience of suffering and he says in verse 10 I'll read it maybe just a wee bit before that for Christ's sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but that which comes through faith in Christ the righteousness from God that depends on faith that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings that I may go into partnership with his sufferings that I would have koinonia in his suffering becoming like him in his death and that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead Paul there in chapter 3 he gives this wonderful statement of how justification works of how our salvation effectively works our salvation is that which makes us in God's eyes and in God's presence righteous acceptable to him our sin covered holy and that

happens because we receive the righteousness of Jesus we're clothed in the righteousness of Christ but Paul says as well that there's something else going on here something deep and mysterious in that God hasn't left us at that point there's a work that goes on that as we go on as believers there's a continual progress of that work of our sanctification of our being made more and more like Christ Jesus and the truth of it is that there is no gain without pain in the Christian life the mystery is that there is no glory without the road of the cross without us being taken to that place where Jesus himself was taken to and so when

Paul talks about the Christian somehow participating in the death of Jesus he's talking about two separate things in fact there is a sense in which we participate in the death of Jesus for our salvation at the cross the old person with its sin and its guilt is put to death our sin is dealt with there it's completed the work of salvation is done but there is also an experience of an ongoing progress in the Christian life where we are coming time and again to the death of Jesus and where we need to experience in our own bodies the ongoing work of dying anew putting to death the sin that is within us ensuring that it is dealt with in Christ and so here

Paul is talking about that second thing that participation that goes on in the way we think about our lives the way that we go on thinking about what happens with us daily and that's why for the Christian that participation in the gospel is not just a one-off thing that happens at the beginning of your Christian life sometimes that's the way we think we get swept into thinking about conversion has been something that happened in the past and that's what it belongs and then after that we're just going on as Christians and we're walking and we're learning and we're growing and so on but actually what we need is the cross that was there at the beginning every day in our experience that we keep coming back to and examining the death of Jesus and learning from what Christ has done in order to put to death the sin that is within us in order to keep being refreshed in this work and progress of redemption in our lives and in order to bring about the fullness of the restored image of God in order for us to attain full

[31:16] Christ likeness as Paul says in order that I may become somehow worthy or attain the resurrection of the dead in order that I can become like Christ in his victory and in the glorification that was his when he rose from the dead and has ascended up into heaven to be with the father in order that I may experience the fullness of the new life of God in me I need to keep coming back to and experiencing the suffering along the way and this is a strange thing about God's providence in our lives that working and flying in tandem with the Holy Spirit often takes us into places of suffering the places where the cost of discipleship is laid bare and very clear to us where it is not cheap grace that we are called to but we are called to something costly we're called to something extreme we're called to lay down our lives in the pursuit of the righteousness and the glory of Jesus remember how

Jesus himself did not count equality with God something to be grasped it's not something to hold on to for Jesus rather he empties himself and taking the form of a servant and becoming obedient to death for us as Christians that is a pathway that will take us into costly places it's a pathway that will lead us to places of suffering and sorrow and anguish sometimes it will be places of psychological sorrow where we have to wrestle with our own sinful selves and our own sinful thoughts where in fact the desires of our hearts are the things that are so wrong and there has to be surgery done to cut these things away there's a suffering associated with that that as Christians as we put to death the sin that is within us there is a pain a suffering of that process of putting sin to death but equally there's an external root of suffering as well where we have to give up the comforts that we take for granted where we have to sacrifice the comforts that we think we're entitled to the things that we think to ourselves we have earned and say that's mine and we would want to grasp it and hold it tight and say no Lord you can take other things away from me but not this not my comfortable job not my comfortable home not my easy life not my early retirement but rather

I can press on in the costly path of obedience because there is a greater prize there is that partnership with Jesus where we are conformed to be like him and where we gain everything there is a prize to be won and without fellowship without this partnership without this experience of togetherness with Christ himself the glories that we would long for will never be attained and so we need Jesus we need to come with Christ as we go on in this pathway of obedience to him to the

prize and the goal of that upward calling in him

Philippians is a letter all about fellowship and strangely it's a letter of fellowship that leads to joy remember Paul's prayer right at the beginning I am filled with joy when I think about you because of your partnership in the gospel and then he says remember because of that partnership in the gospel you have an opportunity for partnership in the Holy Spirit and he says that partnership in the Holy Spirit will lead perhaps to the partnership with Christ and his suffering but the final outcome of that which is implied is the full blessings of that partnership with Christ in glory where we will be with him for all eternity we rejoice therefore in a God who gives us all things and who will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ

Jesus to God our Father be glory forever and ever Amen let's pray Heavenly Father we would bow before you just now and we thank you that there is a salvation to be had that there is a partnership in the gospel that we can know and experience for ourselves and I pray for anyone here tonight who does not yet know that in its fullness those here who don't know Jesus as their saviour have not settled in faith in him and I pray Lord that you would open their hearts just now to receive Christ that you would help them to trust in Jesus and to discover that partnership in eternal life that is laid out before them along the way Lord we pray that you would help us to experience that partnership of the Holy Spirit that we would know the Holy Spirit's help in our lives that we would know the Holy [37:50] Spirit's leading and direction and that we would heed where the Holy Spirit leads us because that is indeed the path of blessing in the life of the Christian and ultimately Lord if that leads us to places of suffering we pray that we would not despair in it but that we would know that this suffering that we endure is a partnership in the sufferings of Jesus it is indeed as Paul says elsewhere it is making up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the salvation of this world and so Lord may we through all that we endure show forth the glorious riches of our God and show that he is worthy of our trust even when times of despair may come to us help us encourage us on the road enable us to be a blessing and we ask this all in Jesus name Amen and we're going to sing in conclusion in the

Scottish Psalter Psalm 133 this is page 424 in the psalm book page 424 this is a psalm that expresses the same joy that Paul had as he thought about the fellowship of the Philippian church behold so see look and see this is worth noting how good a thing it is and how becoming well together such as brethren are in unity to dwell like precious ointment on the head that down the beard did flow even Aaron's beard and to the skirts did of his garments go it's that that sense of anointing is really the Holy Spirit's work it's the spirit that anoints us and enables us and equips us for work in God's service and that flows out of this partnership that we have with Christ and with the Holy Spirit and this partnership in the work of the gospel that we're called to and so as Herman's Jew the Jew that doth on Zion hills descend for there the blessing

God commands life that shall never end the promise of everlasting life is one that is bound up in the unity of God's people with their Messiah with their Savior Christ he is the one who will water in the new heavens and the new earth will water the tree of life and the fruit of that tree will be the means by which we have an experience that everlasting life as well and so the blessing of God is that Jew that flows from Mount Zion itself it's a wonderful picture in the psalm of the blessings of unity overflowing in the life of the church so behold how good a thing it is and how becoming well let's stand and sing the whole psalm together such shall unity to dwell like precious ointment on the head that down the bearded flow he made your spirit and to the church did all his garments go as her most do the junta of

Zion on hills be said for there the blessing God commands life that shall never end the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and always Amen a Thank you.