

Philippians 1

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[0 : 01] So the church in Philippi is a good church. It's the kind of place your friend might tell you to go when you're on holiday, as of this week. The kind that's recommended on good Christian websites. It's not like the church in Corinth, is it, accused of immorality, lawsuits, selfishness in serving the Lord's Supper.

But neither are they high and mighty like the Galatians, who trust in their own works and believe that by following the law they can save themselves.

No, in fact, after his typical opening in verse 2, where Paul preaches grace and peace to them, he immediately follows with thanksgiving.

Now, in verses 3 and 4, have a look with me. You can tell that Paul is speaking to dear friends. You can see the love that he expresses towards the Philippians.

In verse 3, imagine that this was written to you for a second. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you. Always, and in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy.

[1 : 20] What a joyous greeting. I imagine few of us have experienced such joy when our friends see us once again. But Paul loves the Philippians. Why? He tells them in the next sentence.

Because these are his partners in the Gospel, from the first days until now. The church in Philippi doesn't argue like others do against Paul's authority. He doesn't have to wrestle with them.

There's an air of familiarity. He has no need to commend himself again to these people when he talks to them. They trust him. They trust in Christ. They live holy lives as best they can.

They are a good church. Now, as Lawrence has said, I've only been to IPC Ealing, I think, two or three times before. And it was a blessing to be here in June and meet several of you.

Sadly, I don't know this congregation as well as I would like to. But I think that there is some similarity between the church here in Ealing and the church in Philippi.

[2 : 31] The weather, I don't know, probably isn't as good in Ealing as in Philippi, but both are well-taught, respectable churches. Churches both know and live the Gospel.

This is why I've chosen the letters to the Philippians to preach from. The question is, what's next? What instruction, what encouragement does the Apostle Paul give to a church such as this?

Now, I'll only be preaching on verse 1 to 26. And in this section, he gives no instruction.

In this section we've heard together, barring the last bit, there are no further instructions. From verse 1 to 26, Paul offers no commandment.

He never says, stop this or do this. Paul encourages them in verses 1 to 8. You have a look. Search the Scriptures. It was a good thing to tell whether I'm telling the truth.

[3 : 41] But verses 1 to 8, he encourages them. He prays for them, verses 9 to 11. He tells them of the progress of the Gospel and of his own life, his expectations, his struggles, his joys.

Verses 12 to 26. Only in verse 27 does he begin to command. Then saying, let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ. What this congregation needs to begin with, Paul decides, is not a new commandment.

What they need, what we need, in part, is encouragement and faithful prayer. You may be sitting there thinking, that's it.

That's the master plan of God, which Paul communicates to the church. Yes, yes it is. My first point is this. We need to learn, or to keep learning, to trust Christ.

In a word, their task is this. Trust Christ. And that's my first point. It is harder than it sounds.

Anybody who's been living the Christian life for longer than a couple of years will know that.

[4 : 51] It's harder than it sounds, though, precisely because it's so easy. It's a bit of a paradox, but consider how it would feel for the Philippians when they hear this.

You are not the ones who will do the work required. When they're eagerly expecting news, when they're perhaps expecting some instruction, they are told, you are not the ones to do this work. The first thing Paul says after his expression of joy is in verse 6. Read this with me. He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. What are they to do? Nothing. He will do it. Paul offers instead of an instruction, an encouragement. And I know that it's one we desperately need today. I want you to imagine for a second sitting in the congregation at Philippi and hearing these words.

[6:01] He who began a good work in you he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion. Some of you might not have to think of being in that congregation to think, you mean someone else, right?

You mean the guy a few rows further forward who sings really loudly. And that's the guy who this letter is referring to. And I just happen to be here along for the ride.

The lovely older lady who's just relentlessly kind. She, God starts for good work in her but not in me. I'm sure there would have been some who would far rather have been given an instruction.

We're like that, aren't we? I'm sure there's some of you today who'd rather that Paul was giving you, was wrestling with you, almost. To trust him, believe him. Giving you something to kind of wrestle back against, perhaps.

Give me something to work on. Is that not what we want? Why are there so many self-help books that are so popular?

[7:10] So many YouTube videos that say, if this one thing was different in your life, everything would change. It's the secret that so-and-so hates. That you can find out, you can do this, because we like to think we can fix things.

Some of us like being told there's something wrong with us. If I have a major problem, we think, I could turn my life around.

Now, I'm certain that some of the Philippians must have wished they were given a hard moral lesson. Perhaps, maybe our letters just got mixed up with the ones in the Galatians. I mean, I feel in need for some sort of real knocking down.

I've been quite full of pride recently. Perhaps it's just got mixed up along the road. It's hard to hear that we simply need to trust Christ. That he will finish the work that he started.

Now, I'm sure there have also been plenty of people who have felt that this declaration simply didn't apply to them. I mentioned this earlier. The reason that I know that there must have been those people then is because there are those people now.

[8:13] I'm one of them. I'm sure some of you are too. You know, there's one passage, if you had to pick one passage of the Bible that scares you above all others, I wonder what we would pick.

It's a bit of an odd question, but there's one that springs right to my mind as soon as I ask that question. The passage where Jesus says, there will be someone that day who will say, Lord, Lord. Jesus will respond, depart from me. I never knew you. Many of us will hear what Paul says and think, well, this wasn't written to us.

It was written to people in Philippi. Even then, Paul couldn't possibly have known every one of those people. He can't have been that sure about their salvation. And even if he was sure, this guy at the front who's talking to me doesn't know me.

We know our hearts, don't we? There's something right about that instinct because we know our hearts and there's something deep within us that refuses to believe that Christ doesn't need our help.

[9:27] That refuses to believe that Christ who came for the tax collector and sinner came also for you. How can someone be that sure that someone that holy came to someone like me?

It's one of the constant problems of the Christian life, isn't it? How can someone be that sure that someone that holy came to someone like me? Well, if you think like that, read verse 6 again.

You might notice that I left something out last time. Philippians 1.6 I should encourage you to read your Bibles well. And I am sure of this. That's how it starts with it.

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.

Paul, in a sense, Paul doesn't need to know you. How does Paul know that those who Christ has even begun the smallest work in will finish it?

[10:30] It's because he knows Christ. Christ. The church in Philippi needed to hear this, and so do we, that this Saviour came precisely for those who cannot believe he came to save them.

This morning it's my duty to tell you that if you feel sorrow over your sin, if you confessed your sin earlier, if you glorify God for any good gifts you received, for any good you might have done, then you are the one, Paul is speaking to.

And don't be put off by the next verse. Have a look at it with me. In verse 7, we should be encouraged by this also. Paul claims the Philippians can be sure that they are partakers with him in grace because they are with him in his imprisonment.

Ah, you may think, none of us, probably none of us, not certain, have been imprisoned because of the gospel. Perhaps, if you had, you might be a bit surer that God has started a good work in you. But this is not what Paul means. Look carefully at verse 7. Paul tells them, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

[11:53] Paul. There is only one problem, the Philippians weren't in prison with Paul. What he means is not that they came and visited him either, or that they were in there with him, but they are partakers with him in grace.

Why? Because they mourn with him. They rejoice with him. In verse 19, have a look, they pray for him. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.

They do this because they love the Lord Jesus Christ and his church. Now, have you prayed at this church for missionaries, for ministers, for friends who are suffering for the sake of the gospel?

I'm absolutely certain that you have. You share in grace if there is any love in you for your brothers and sisters in Christ.

If there is any encouragement in Christ and love for the Lord, even though it might be small and weak, it is grace given to you by God. Jesus will enlarge it.

[13:08] The Holy Spirit will bring it to completion. I mentioned earlier that I studied the Puritans, the great Puritan Richard Sibbes, put it like this, Christ cherishes even the least beginnings, especially those he himself has begun.

The Holy Spirit is content to dwell, even in offensive souls. Though it cost Christ his life, you are made holy by his blood.

That is the news that Paul brings to the Philippians. It is news that they already know, but it is news that they need. For those in whom he begins a good work, it will be brought to completion.

Now, my second point to move on to concerns perhaps those who don't struggle to think that you are saved, but do struggle for encouragement.

No doubt some of the Philippians, though they have been partners in the gospel since the first days, they have simply been slogging along in the paths of righteousness. righteousness. There's no bad thing, but perhaps you have been doing the same.

[14:22] Perhaps you have grown up in the church, you have grown up in the knowledge of the Lord, you have been a believer for 10, 20, 30, 50, 70 years. You have believed with certainty, but not always with joy.

Well, if this is you, Paul's prayer in verses 9 to 11 is for you. Read with me. 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, so the glory and praise of God.

this prayer is for the Philippians who've just been keeping on, keeping on. They've just kept going in the path of righteousness, and this is the prayer that they need.

This is the prayer Paul, who knows that, decides that they need this good church. Paul prays for the Philippians. Again, he doesn't command them specifically in this passage, but there are things they can learn from him.

Instead, Paul pleads with God that he might bless the Philippians with love, knowledge, wisdom, that they might be blameless and fruitful until the day of Christ.

[15:54] It's important to remember that God does this. It is a nudge. Think of the metaphor. Have you ever thought deeply about the metaphor of fruit?

fruit? The fruit hangs from the branch, right? I'm no botanist or anything, but I'm pretty sure the fruit hangs from the branch in most trees. And yet, we know that a tree without root will bear none.

Paul's prayer here is that we will remain rooted in Jesus Christ, not that we will somehow bear fruit on our own. He is the only one who may bear this fruit.

Look at verse 11. Don't just believe me on this. Filled with the fruit of righteousness, that comes from where? Through Jesus Christ. To the glory and praise of God.

It's a prayer, not a commandment, and that is an important distinction because Paul is teaching them, he is teaching us, to pray this prayer. For those who are carrying on in the paths of righteousness, pray this prayer.

[17:06] We'll be praying this at the end. And I want you this week to try and reflect on it. How much do we pray this? In fact, my second point is this, pray Christ.

It's a strange phrase, I'll admit, pray Christ, but what Paul tries to convey in this chapter stretches language almost to his breaking point. We can see this when he says in verse 21 that to live is Christ.

Now if you're a non-native English speaker, you'll know that sentence doesn't seem to make a lot of sense. To live is Christ. It's almost that he just, his being, his living and Christ are so united that he cannot put them into words.

Now, what I mean when I say pray Christ is this. Pray that we might have the wisdom of Christ, the love of Christ, the knowledge of Christ.

In short, that we could have the mind and heart of Christ himself. This is how we will be blameless on the day of Christ. And this should be our prayer. Now, don't mistake what Paul is saying.

[18:18] It's not that sinners can't be blameless before God on the day of Christ unless they clean up their act. That's clearly not what he is saying. No. But he longs this for our good.

Paul says in verse 8, for God is my witness how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus, which is a stunning phrase in itself. Just imagine a world in which you could go to your Christian friend and say, I yearn for you with the affection of Christ Jesus himself.

Not only that, Paul swears an oath to say this. For God is my witness. That's how certain he is. We should pray that God blesses us with such Christ-likeness as Paul has attained.

Now, what is for our good? If he says this for our good, what is it? To be blameless on the day of Christ and to glorify and praise God in our lives.

I'll say that again, that's the purpose of the Christian life. To be blameless on the day of Christ and while on earth, to glorify and praise God in our lives. that is our purpose.

[19:28] John Calvin said of Paul here that he desires wisdom for the Philippians with this view, that they may, with unwavering step, go forward in their calling until the day of Christ.

How often do we consider the day of Christ? I used to have a friend who occasionally, my wife's diary, would just snatch her diary and then write, Jesus returns, question mark, on random days. It's a bit of an odd thing to do, but I was quite struck by it. I mean, we tend to just think that Jesus won't return on Tuesday, the 7th of August.

Not least because I don't think Tuesday, the 7th of August is the date this year, but we just don't think that that will occur. And yet, that is part of our purpose.

Do we blame us on the day of Christ? Christ. Now, you may think, well, I already know this. I pray that I have wisdom of Christ, but so often we pray for material needs first, don't we?

[20:38] I want you to see how different Paul's prayer is. Imagine if Paul had been to your local prayer meeting and picked up his priorities from there. Have a think about that. It can be a scary thought.

Perhaps you might think, well, a prayer meeting is pretty good. You get some good priorities. I wonder if he'd say something like this. You can read along, compare 9 to 11 here with this if you want.

I wonder if he picked up his priorities from the prayer meeting that you regularly have. Would he pray this prayer? It is my prayer that your stuff may abound. It is my prayer that your stuff may abound more and more in all cupboards and containers so that we may be well established in this world.

And so have a good job and a healthy family for the day of tomorrow. Would you pick that up, you think, from the prayers that we utter?

It's not bad, by the way, to pray for secure employment, to pray for our basic needs here on earth, but we forget that our most basic need is not here on earth. It is not today.

[21 : 47] Our most basic need is to worship and serve our creator and be blameless on the day of Christ. I'll give you one other incentive here. We often chase joy in the Christian life, don't we?

I often hear people, Christians and non-Christians, saying they don't have enough joy. They just don't feel joyful. They don't feel happy. It's a huge thing in the world.

The school of happiness, the school of life, in fact, there's one here in London, is basically a sort of trying to teach you how people in history have taught people how to be happy.

There's various sorts of things. How can we be happy? How can we have joy? Here's an incentive to pray Paul's prayer. Paul has joy, doesn't he? Think about the joy that he's expressed in this letter. And he's in prison, right? This is a man who's got nothing. Prisons, by the way, were certifiably far worse than they are today.

[22 : 47] Up until probably the 19th century, a great number of people died in prison. Paul's living out his final days as far as he knows. In fact, he reasons about it in the next bit of the passage.

Now, Paul has this joy. What we wouldn't give to have such unbridled joy as Paul has here. And that we would be content even in prison. Isn't this what we long for in this world?

Let me try and say something I think Paul might agree with. Is it any wonder that we don't experience Paul's joy if we hardly ever pray Paul's prayer?

Is it any wonder that we don't experience his joy if we hardly ever pray his prayer? Praying for the world is something we are commanded to do. Lord, make this world right is a good prayer.

But first we should pray, Lord, make me right for heaven. And if we think so little of heaven and so much of earth, why should we be surprised when we search our hearts that we cannot find heaven's joys?

[23 : 59] Do you pray Christ? Do you pray first and foremost that God will give you discernment? That he will give you love? Just think about that. When was the last time that you asked not just for God to love you but that he would make your love abound for him as well as for others?

Pray that he will bless you with knowledge of him. For to know and enjoy God is the joy of the Christian life. And my last two points are very brief so I'll run through them.

If this is a point it's exceptionally brief which is preach Christ. Paul is Christ obsessed he sets a high bar. He refers to Christ 16 times in these 26 verses.

In five times he talks of God. His joy in the Lord knows almost no balance. Just look at verses 12 to 14. We'll skim over these but can you imagine yourself saying these in his position?

First piece of news he passes on his imprisonment is this. I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. He says the imperial guard know why I'm here. the people of God are encouraged.

[25 : 07] Glory to God. Can you stop the complaint? There doesn't seem to be one. Well of course none of ours are an apostle but we all have something to learn from Paul here.

I want you to imagine a world in which your first thought was for the progress of the gospel and your last thought was for yourself. This is Paul's world. God. He strives to grasp the mind and heart of Christ himself and presses on towards the goal.

He's not even bothered by envious preachers because whether in pretense or in truth Christ is the flame and in that I rejoice. He says yes and I will rejoice. The world wants this joy don't they?

There are those who think that money and luxury lead to happiness but our modern society is waking up to the problems that these cause steadily declining mental health depression anxiety.

There's no one I think in modern day Britain who doesn't think that these are among the biggest issues in society today. And the world rightly seeks a solution. I used to be a school teacher and I can't tell you the number of times that self esteem or making more effort was offered as this solution.

[26 : 24] They say things like climb your Everest or cross your own Atlantic. Usually there's four stars who were sort of seated in the congregations where I can see you smiling there.

There's usually sports stars who are like given as the example of someone who's made a lot of effort. Their mistakes are only good because they eventually lead to success. The world wants to answer the question how can I be happy?

Well Paul has the answer and this is my fourth and last point. Live Christ. That's his answer. It's an unpopular answer and as we see it's a paradoxical answer but that is his answer.

How do you find contentedness? How can you rejoice in all situations? Paul's answer is this. Prepare to die by making Christ your life.

Prepare to die by making Christ your life. That's my final point. To live Christ which is to prepare to die. In verse 19 he claims he will be given deliverance.

[27 : 26] It's a mark of how worldly we are and how spiritual Paul is that we usually imagine that deliverance he means is from prison but he carries on and says that with full courage now and always Christ will be honoured in my mortal body whether by life or by death.

Now Paul is hard to understand isn't he? It's partly his long sentences but mostly I want to suggest it's this. We don't understand his logic because we don't understand his heart and indeed the heart of Christ.

His reasoning is quite strange to us especially here we all fear death. It's something we just don't talk about in polite company but Paul gives death a central place in his sentences.

Paul is confident of his deliverance. He eagerly expects that he will not be ashamed. To him it's almost as if it doesn't matter whether he lives or dies.

He is first of all confident of eternal deliverance from the wrath of God. Beyond that what else matters? Now everything Paul says relies on this kind of spiritual logic that I'll call it.

[28 : 42] Sometimes it's hard to understand yes but often that's simply because his desires are so much higher than ours. When we use our brains on an everyday basis they're powered by selfishness in our hearts.

We usually use them just to get something we already want in this world faster. That's how we use our reasoning, our brains, right? When Paul uses his he only seeks Christ and the coming kingdom. That's what seems from Philippians. I want you to observe how different the workings of his mind are. This is one of the final things I'll say. Just look at verses 22 to 26.

For a moment here we catch the inner workings of Paul's mind as the cogs are wearing. He tries to work out the answer to a question hardly anyone here probably thinks is a question and certainly wouldn't think it was a healthy question.

He tries to work out whether he should think better of living or dying. If I am to live, he says in the flesh, verse 22, that means fruitful labor for me.

[29 : 51] Yet which I shall choose, I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better.

But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Paul does the calculations here doesn't he? But notice he himself doesn't figure in the calculations.

think about this, this spiritual logic that Paul's using. Try to apply that to your own lives. We should pray that God will make our aims so high that they touch only his glory.

Paul aims to the glory of Christ. He is Christ obsessed and self-sacrificing. It's a paradox of this world but as soon as you don't care about gaining more stuff for yourself, you don't care about your own life and possessions as much.

As soon as you begin to grasp the glory, the kingdom of God, as soon as you take an act of self-sacrifice, that's exactly the moment that frees you to live joyfully on this earth.

[31 : 05] my desire is to depart and be with Christ, says Paul. It's not a rallying cry for the sad and beaten down.

It's a rallying cry for the rejoicing. Will you say with Paul that for me to live is Christ and to die is gain? That's the question I want you to go away considering.

What do you say with him? For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. For those of you who are unafraid of death, who consider it gain, rejoice because God in his mercy has taught you how to live.

And if you need to ask your saviour Jesus Christ for some measure of the love and wisdom and knowledge of God that Paul commends, well, that is exactly what he asks you.

to pray for. I'll conclude with this thought. So much of our worry is of this world, but the more we reflect on the certain hope of Christ, the more we can share with Paul in the joy of Christ, both in life and in death.

[32 : 19] What is your only comfort in life and death? That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, both in life and death.

To my faithful saviour Jesus Christ.