

Partners Until the Last Day

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[0 : 00] Well, Josh is going to be preaching to us this morning, and we're going to be looking at Paul's letter to the Philippians over the next few Sunday mornings. And perhaps you'd turn there now as we read together on page 980, if you have one of the Church Blue Bibles, Philippians chapter 1.

And we're going to read together the first section, Philippians 1, verses 1 to 11, where Paul opens his letter to a dearly beloved church that's been very precious to him and he to them, right from the very beginning of his missionary labors in Europe, a great supporting church, a church who were standing by him even in his darkest hours of imprisonment for the sake of the gospel.

And here's how he writes. Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi with the overseers and deacons, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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

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

[1 : 44] For you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you with all the affection of Christ Jesus.

And it's my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent.

And so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, do please open your Bibles again to Philippians chapter 1.

How do you distinguish between the genuine article and a fake? A few years back, my wife stumbled across a rather dashing painting in a junk shop.

[2 : 57] Money exchanged hands and the painting came home with her. Being captivated by this painting, research was done and she became convinced that the painting might be a genuine missing masterpiece of a famous duck painter, potentially worth a pretty penny.

So the painting went back in the car and was taken for inspection to Sotheby's. Within seconds, the expert who was used to handling the genuine article decried the painting a fake.

However, he did assure her that the frame was at least worth the £20 she paid for it. On a more serious note, we've all heard horror stories, or perhaps been part of them, of people being targeted by fraudsters, either on the phone or at the door.

A chap from the internet company calls, wanting to check your details are all still correct. Is it genuine or not? Increasingly, these sorts of scams are harder to distinguish between the real and the fake.

This sort of scam and artifice can be found within the church too. Whilst it's claiming to be the genuine article, imposters and fake teaching worm their way into the church, rewriting the truth and spreading dangerous lies.

[4 : 14] We see this in churches today. Sometimes it's blatant. Sometimes it takes a bit of time to surface. But this is not a modern phenomenon.

The apostle Paul faced constant opposition to his ministry. He was called to take the message of the Lord Jesus and his kingdom to the world. But at every turn, he ran into opposition.

We can be fairly sure that during Paul's later ministry, there was a counter-mission at play. A group of Jews who had followed Paul and seek tempos, perverted Jewish practices upon Gentiles in order for them to be true Christians.

And for a church whose origin wasn't Jewish, the Philippians may well have been shaken by such fraudsters. And so who do you listen to?

How do you know if you are the genuine article? When two different groups tell you two opposing things about being a Christian, who do you listen to? This is the issue that Paul addresses in this letter to the Philippians.

[5 : 19] And he's saying to them, stick with me as I stick with Jesus. To both reassure and to comfort the Philippians, Paul provides a proof to show their authenticity.

And it works a bit like this. Money is printed from plates. The paper goes in and comes out bearing the distinct marks of the template.

Quite deliberately, counterfeit money is noticeably different from real notes. There might be similarities. But when lined up with the printing plate, when handled with the real thing, such money can be and should be disregarded instantly.

Paul uses the same principle. Jesus is the template. And all true believers bear his marks. They fit the mold. What is this mold?

Well, according to chapter two, it's this. Jesus humbled himself, taking on the form of a servant, not grasping at all that was God's, but instead letting it all go.

[6 : 25] Taking on human flesh, as we've been celebrating over Christmas, and coming and dying so that God's people might be rescued. And then, because of this, he was exalted.

Christ's template then is that of lowliness and sacrifice for the gospel, and then glory. This theological truth, this pattern, percolates through this entire letter.

Jesus' model underpins what Paul is saying here. And throughout the letter, Paul introduces genuine Christians who clearly fit the mold. And he also introduces those who stick out like a sore thumb because they're counterfeits, they're opponents of Christ.

Paul himself fits perfectly with Jesus' template. Paul shares Jesus' purpose, serving God that his people might be rescued. And Paul shares Jesus' pattern, sacrificing himself in order to serve that purpose.

Now, there are lots of themes that run through Philippians that many of us will be familiar with. Joy, suffering, partnership, for example. But the thread that runs through the whole thing and shapes these other themes is the theme that most permeates Paul's theology.

[7 : 46] The future. Or as Philippians calls it, the day of Christ. And so if we're going to see the clear difference between the real thing and the counterfeits, we must see the future in the right way.

For the pattern of the true people of God, as exemplified in Jesus, has a distinct difference from the counterfeit thing. And the difference is literally the difference between heaven and earth.

In chapter 3, Paul urges the Philippians to keep imitating Paul in the face of those who undermine the cross, those who nullify all that the cross means. And then look at chapter 3, verses 19 and 20. He says this of them. Verse 19. Their end is destruction. Their God is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a savior. Heaven and earth. The real thing looks forward to where we belong, knowing that one day we will be there.

[9 : 02] The counterfeits live today as if heaven is here, or as if it will never come. And so as Paul begins to talk in chapter 1 about real gospel partnership, real fellowship in the gospel, these things are shaped by the future.

For the incarnate Christ, his future was glory. It was being lifted high. But that meant that the present for him was to be inglorious and blue.

And if Paul's future was a glorious one of being lifted high, then his present experience was one of being blue. And so Paul wants the Philippians to continue to partner with him, to continue to have their eyes fixed on heaven and not earth.

And so as he begins his letter with thanks for them and in prayer for them, his plea is for them to continue to partner with him. And he bases it on three things.

First, sticking with Paul produces rejoicing. Verses three to five, sticking with Paul produces rejoicing. There is a deep joy and encouragement that comes from working side by side with people in the gospel and seeing them continue in the faith, particularly when we've known them since they

first received Christ.

[10:33] Joy is a big theme in Philippians. However, it might seem strange that Paul has so much to rejoice in. After all, he's in prison. And to make matters worse, whilst he's in prison in Rome, there are preachers in Rome who are taking advantage of the situation, using Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to get a leg up, to preach out of envy and malice.

How utterly miserable. So-called brothers kicking you whilst you're down, so-called gospel partners, using Paul's suffering and imprisonment as a PR opportunity to further their own ambitions.

How astonishing, then, that the first thing that Paul says in this letter penned from his prison cell is not, pray for me or ease my troubles. No, look at verse three.

He says, I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you, making my prayer with joy. Paul is thankful and joyous.

How on earth can that be? If I were Paul in this situation, I'm pretty sure that my prayer letter would read, pray for me, I'm in prison, pray that I'll get out. But instead, Paul is full of joy.

[11:54] Why? Well, look at verse five. Because the Philippians have partnered with him. They've continually partnered with him from the beginning.

They haven't left him. They haven't abandoned him. Paul's regular experience as an apostle, as a minister of the gospel, was to be deserted. Time and again, that's what happened.

As Paul was marked by the ingloriousness of ministry in this world, people wanted to leave him.

Whether it be because his ministry looked weak or because staying with him would mean sharing his prison cell.

But not the Philippians. They continually stood with him. Paul had the privilege of seeing the gospel take root in the lives of this church. And as he moved on through Thessalonica and onwards on his journey, he has had constant cheer because he sees their growth in tangible ways.

Paul rejoiced to see genuine gospel fruit in the lives of those he'd invested in. I'm sure many of us have experienced similar joys. The young teenager that you've read the Bible with, making great strides and counting the cost of being faithful to Jesus.

[13:13] The student in your release the word group, desiring to test out whether ministry might be for them. Or the member of your growth group, inviting colleagues to read the word one-to-one.

No matter what's going on with you, if you hear these kinds of things and see people you know and love making strides in the gospel, that summons up a deep joy within you.

Very often in the midst of great sorrow, the greatest source of joy isn't something in our own lives. When we're looking inward, focusing only on what troubles us most, then the likelihood is that real joy will escape us.

It's quite tragic to watch a person so self-focused with such narrow horizons, fixating on, perplexed by, sunk by the very smallest of problems.

Whereas, there's a dear older saint that I know. This person's life is marked by investing in other people. And even when they were taken very unwell and close to death, their concern was largely outward.

[14:20] And so in the midst of all their pain, they never failed to have a smile on their face. Lasting joy comes from deep concern for other people.

Paul's horizon was always wider than himself and his own troubles. The Philippians' ongoing growth in the gospel, their ongoing partnership, was a genuine cheer to Paul.

For he was seeing the seeds of the gospel that he planted blooming into glorious fruit. Only the genuine article produces this sort of fruit and thus this sort of rejoicing.

Because of Paul's heavenly horizon, rejoicing was possible. Joy could be taken from seeing gospel investments flourish, from seeing eternal significance to his gospel partnership.

And no prison cell could rob him of that joy. No miserable competitors who wanted his downfall could stop him feeling that joy.

[15:27] And so like Paul, we can know that joy as we invest in others. Pouring out concern for them in deep ways that verse 7, we too hold people in our hearts because of their progress and commitment in the gospel that we've invested in them.

That's how Paul experiences this joy. And so we've seen that sticking with Paul produces rejoicing.

But secondly, Paul also says that sticking with Paul is participating in real ministry, verses 5 and 7.

Sticking with Paul is participating in real ministry, verses 5 and 7. The reason Paul needed to encourage the Philippians is because the real thing is a much harder path in this life than the

counterfeit path.

And so Paul is clear about the nature of this path. But notice that he doesn't say that the Philippians must begin to walk it. Paul is reassuring them in the midst of all of their difficulties that they are the real thing, that this is already the path they're walking.

They aren't getting it wrong just because things are hard. Quite the contrary. Paul is clear. The Philippians' costly partnership is evidence that they're the real thing.

[16:57] The partnership that they have held with Paul from the beginning is a very tangible partnership. They've stuck with Paul in sacrificial ways. In chapter 4 they've been providing financially for him even though things were tough for them.

They were delighted to pour out offerings for him. Flick over to chapter 4 verse 10. Paul rejoices again because of the Philippians saying you have revived your concern for me.

You were indeed concerned for me but you had no opportunity. The Philippians heard of Paul's great need and they wanted to help. For a time they were unable to but not because they lacked the desire.

We see there it was the opportunity. They'd given to his ministry already perhaps at this point that he's talking about they no longer had the resource to give. But as soon as they did they give to Paul once again.

Look to chapter 4 verse 14 he says they've shared his trouble. Verse 15 they were the only church that partnered with Paul by giving to him.

[18:13] Verse 16 they've been sending gifts for his needs. And verse 18 Paul has received from Epaphroditus their gifts.

the Philippians had opened their wallets again and again and again for Paul and when he was in prison they sent to him one of their best men in Epaphroditus.

Paul is showing the Philippians that they are the real thing because they fit onto Christ's template. Jesus' example is in chapter 2 verses 6 to 8 Jesus though he was in the form of God didn't count equality with God the thing to be grasped but emptied himself taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.

That's the model sacrifice and service suffering and self-denial that's the template. In chapter 1 Paul himself fits perfectly on top of that template he's in prison people are preaching against him but he doesn't mind as long as Christ is preached.

Paul suffered greatly and he continues to suffer and so he says that he longs to be taken from this life for that is far better. But look in chapter 1 verses 23 to 25 at his conclusion he says I'm hard pressed between the two that is passing away to be with Christ and staying in order to help the Philippians 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.

[20:00] Convinced of this I know that I will remain and continue with you all. Paul fits the template sacrifice and service.

Timothy in chapter 2 fits the template we read of him that his concern isn't for himself but genuinely for the Philippians Epaphroditus fits the template he was willing to serve to the point of death just like the Lord Jesus and Paul's point is that so too is the case with the Philippians they longed to keep giving to Paul even when they couldn't they wouldn't be stopped though they didn't consider their own comfort something to be grasped but instead emptied their wallets doing whatever they could to be servants to Paul Paul is showing the Philippians that they fit onto Christ's template they too are marked by sacrifice and service Paul's saying they're the real thing because they put themselves out to participate in Paul's ministry verse 7 of chapter 1 he says they are genuinely partakers with Paul of grace they've received the gospel but look also look they are partakers of his prison cell and his proclamation notice that Paul draws attention to why he's so sure of this about the Philippians at the start of verse 7 he says it's right for him to feel this way a better translation of this would be that it is right for me to have this mind about you the word used here for feel is the word used throughout this letter for have this mind and it's nowhere used as much as it is in Philippians so in chapter 2 when Paul points to Jesus the way he phrases it is verse 5 have this mind which is yours in Christ have the mind of humility and concern for others and then in chapter 4 when we looked at that we saw that the

Philippians are concerned for Paul that's the same word again the Philippians had this mind for Paul and Paul has it for them the mind that follows Christ's pattern the Philippians are the real thing they bought into Paul's ministry and so they're bearing the cost of it those two things go together

Paul's personal sufferings pair with his proclamation of the scriptures his ministry goes hand in hand with his being marginalized it's very easy to question this isn't it when we do pour ourselves out for the Lord Jesus and all that comes our way is frustration and all that comes our way is feeling in this world's eyes it's a very common feeling to question if we truly are the genuine article real Christians when we have so much difficulty to face when it's so costly to be so when we serve and sacrifice and all we get back is scorn it's very easy to question it am I the real thing am I doing what I should be doing but Paul is making clear that that is a vital component of life as a Christian in this world the cost is a vital component Paul says later in chapter one that it has been granted to God's people not just to believe but to suffer for his sake we might think happy Christmas that doesn't sound like a great gift but the necessity of suffering leads on to our third and final point being brought low is key to being lifted high and so thirdly sticking with Paul promises reward sticking with Paul promises rewards we see this in verse 6 and then in 9-11 like Jesus like Paul like Timothy like Epaphroditus it is this life lived low that leads to the life to come being lived high in light of Jesus emptying of himself he was exalted this is where the difference between heaven and earth comes into focus the

Philippians opponents have their minds set on earthly things we'll see what that looks like in a couple of weeks time but our citizenship is in heaven if earth is all that there is then the cost isn't worth it but when we belong to something much greater when heaven is in view then no sacrifice is too much as was the case for Jesus for Paul for Timothy and Epaphroditus and so look at how Paul encourages the Philippians to this end his confidence that they are the real thing leads him to saying verse 6 I'm sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus what has begun will be completed Paul is saying you have clearly bought into the gospel you are partakers in it with all that that has cost you and so it's clear that God will keep you through all the trials and tribulations to come and he will see you raised with

[25 : 56] Jesus at the last day remember where you're heading Jesus knew that glory was the other side of his cross Paul knows that when he finally breathes his last that it will be gain that it will be far better that's what he says and so having the mind of Christ that Paul shares is not just having a mind for humility and sacrifice it is having these things but it's having them fueled by the sure hope of resurrection of glory of reigning with Jesus for eternity having our minds on this world only on how much it will cost us on how much we'll miss out on will stop us taking hold of the resurrection and so Paul's prayer verse 9 is that their sacrificial love their partnership which has been tangible will abound more and more that it will continue and flourish that their love that is just like

Jesus love will continue and flourish but notice also what Paul prays in this verse that this love will abound more with knowledge and all discernment so that they may approve what is excellent perhaps a more helpful translation of that would be so that they will approve what is of more value that's what the word means his prayer is that they will have their minds fixed on Christ's pattern of being low now because their identity is to be lifted high at the last day that is what is most excellent that is what is of most value that is what will see them verse 10 blameless and pure for the day of Christ nothing else in this world can do that faith is clinging on to the certainty of our future it's clinging on to our heavenly citizenship clinging on to all that has been promised and so ordering our lives by it now and so

Paul's plea is to stick with him when things are hard don't think it's the wrong path when opponents come and try and deceive you don't listen stick with me as I stick with Jesus we're on the cusp of a new year I think it's an incredibly exciting year ahead for our church as we reorder our church life in line with what it means to worship here at the tron let me remind you of what our vision is our vision is that we see the risen Lord Jesus crowded by people from our city and every nation ransomed by his blood raised by his spirit through the gospel reigning for eternity with him to the glory of God the Father that's our future that's another way of saying that our citizenship is in heaven and so remember what our purpose is we worship together to make and grow mature disciples of Jesus Christ in ever greater numbers who with us will glorify God and enjoy him forever that's the same purpose that Paul had that is sticking with Paul his purpose was to build up the saints to proclaim the gospel and even prison wouldn't stop that the cost of doing that was never too much and so as we partner together in this as we strive to grow our church with people being saved with people maturing in their faith with people being equipped to serve the Lord we may well find things difficult we may find that sacrifices are required but remember in it all as we partner together in this

it will produce joy as we see brothers and sisters growing in service as we see people that we've invested in pressing on with heaven as their goal it will be hard and it will be costly but remember that the sacrifice and service that's required is following in the footsteps of Paul and of our Lord Jesus the cost that comes with anything given up for our ministry here together is ennobled because it is walking in Jesus steps after him but in all of it we must have our vision in view that Jesus steps lead to a glorious future that at the end of it all we will reign with him for eternity that we will be exalted with Jesus himself we approach the time of year where new year's resolutions are made why don't we resolve to pray for our church family as Paul prays that our sacrificial love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment so that together we may approve of what is of more value of what is of most value our eternal future with the [31 : 49] Lord Jesus let's pray along those lines heavenly father we ask that as a new year approaches that you would graciously help us to have the certainty of our heavenly citizenship indelibly mark our service for you so that just like our king we too might be pleased to sacrifice so that your people might know your grace and we pray this in Jesus name amen