

Side By Side: Gospel Partnership in Philippians

A Pattern of Thankfulness

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Philippians 1:1-11

Now let me invite you to take your copies of God's Word in your hands and turn with me to the book of Philippians, chapter one: Philippians chapter one. If you're using one of the church bibles you'll find that on page nine hundred and eighty. Before we read God's Word together, let's pray.

Lord Jesus, You are the Good Shepherd of the sheep, and You promise to lead us in, and out, and that we will find pasture for our souls. Would You lead us by green waters and still pastures? Would You restore our souls? Would You do that by Your Word this morning. Come in the power of the Holy Spirit. Wield Your Word to slay sin and cause us to bear fruit, and ignite in our hearts the flames of joyful thanksgiving for Your saving grace. For we ask this in your name. Amen.

Philippians chapter one; we will read from verse one. This is the inspired and inerrant Word of Almighty God.

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 all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 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. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, 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 all with the affection of Christ Jesus. 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, to the glory

and praise of God.

Amen and we praise the lord that he has spoken to us in his holy and sufficient word. May he write its eternal upon all our hearts.

Paul begins the body of his letter here now in verse 3. We're thinking this morning together about the words of verses 3 through 8 and as he does he models for us a reality very well expressed by the Westminster Shorter Catechism question and answer 98, which you all know so very well. I'm sure you'll be able to say it with me, right? How disappointing.[laughter]

Shorter catechism question and answer 98 asks, "*What is prayer?*"

And answers, "*Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will in the name of Christ with confession of sin and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.*"

In other words, the belonging to the essence, to the very definition of Christian prayer is the thankful acknowledgement of the mercies of God. Christian prayer is in part, at least, identifiable by the thankfulness with which is it suffused and permeated in the life of a Christian. And so as you may have noticed if you've read through Paul's letters it is extremely significant that almost every time, it is almost an invariable pattern in the opening few verses of Paul's letters that he begins with thanksgiving. I don't think it would be an overstatement to say that thankfulness is the characteristic mark not just of Paul's letters, but indeed of his ministry and his Christian life. And I'm sure you'll agree in this narcissistic age in which we live this note of thanksgiving offers a profoundly helpful corrective.

So I want us to notice two things in particular.

Actually, it's six things, but we'll say two things about Paul's thanksgivings. Here, first of all, three lessons to learn from Paul's thanksgiving and then, secondly, three motives or three reasons that drive and animate his thankfulness. So three lessons and three motives from Paul's thanksgiving.

Three Lessons from Paul's Thanksgiving

The Godwardness of his Thanksgiving

Verses 3 to 4 first of all, three lessons from Paul's thanksgiving and the first lesson has to do with the direction of his thankfulness. To whom are his thanks directed? Well, of course, Paul's thanksgivings are resolutely Godward in their orientation. Notice he's not thanking the Philippians for their kindness to him. Rather he's thanking God for the Philippians. Paul, do you see, translates the genuine pastoral joy he feels as he hears a good report about the Philippians

prospering and growing in grace. He translates all of that into praise toward the Lord and gives thanks. “Thank yous” roll off our tongues, don’t they, in almost every circumstance, thousands of times perhaps in a week: at the grocery store check-out line, over the dinner table, in the doctor’s office. We’ve been trained, it’s like, it’s an instinctive thing, almost an automatic response.

We recognize every tiny kindness with a word of thanks and so it ought to be a real scandal to us—considering we have been loved with an everlasting love, redeemed at the price of the blood of the Son of God, inhabited by the Spirit of Jesus Christ—it ought to be a real scandal to us that while our “thank yous” towards one another come as second nature. We’re so very reticent to be still more thankful toward the God who has redeemed us. There is a vertical plane that takes priority for our thanksgiving before the horizontal plane. We ought to be laboring to cultivate the grace of thankfulness prior to and more than and first toward God than towards one another. We have perhaps forgotten James 1:17: “Every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variance or shadow due to change.”

Every blessing, no matter the human instrumentality by which it has been brought into your life, every blessing you enjoy is a gift of grace from the hands of your Father and you owe Him your thanks. “Whatsoever is the matter of our rejoicing,” writes Matthew Henry, “is to be the matter of our thanksgiving.”

The things you rejoice in should make you say, “thank you” to the God who has given them.” “What we have the comfort of,” he says, “God must have the glory of.” A directionless vague sense of ill-defined gratitude is in the end sub-Christian, isn’t it? We must learn from Paul to cultivate the spiritual discipline of Godward thankfulness.

The Saturation of His Prayers with Thanksgiving

Second lesson from Paul’s example here is simply to notice that this thankfulness utterly saturates and pervades his life of prayer. He is persistent he says not just in praying for the Philippians, but in giving thanks for the Philippians in all his prayers, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy.” Like the idiosyncrasies of his own signature, Paul’s prayers are saturated with thanksgiving. You could identify them by how pervasive his thanksgiving really is. It is the characteristic mark of Pauline praying. E. M. Bounds, the great 19th century Methodist writer on prayer puts it this way. He says, “Giving thanks is the very life of prayer. It is its fragrance and music, its poetry and crown, the very life of prayer.” That’s what we see here in Paul, isn’t it? Giving thanks isn’t something tacked on at the end as an afterthought to his prayers. It’s not worked up by Paul as a grudging duty. It is the soul of his praying. It’s the very life of his prayers. He overflows in outpourings of gratitude to God. Here’s a man who sees everywhere the grace of God in every life changed, in every kindness given, even in every trial that Paul endures he finds material to fuel thanksgiving. That comes out particularly,

doesn't it, in verse 7. Notice where Paul is as he gives thanks. Here surely is the real rebuke to an ungrateful heart. Paul is writing these things. He's overflowing in praise and thanks to God. Where? In chains! In prison. He is in jail for the cause of the gospel. He says to Philippians he has them in his heart even while he's in chains as he pours out his thanksgiving.

His was a deep-sore trial. We know from the reference to Caesar's household in 422. This letter is written from Rome during his two year imprisonment there. From the description at the end of the book of Acts we know that that imprisonment began relatively comfortably. Paul was under house arrest.

He lived at his own expense. He received guests freely and it was not such a terrible trial to him. However, by the time the letter to the Philippians was penned things seemed to have changed dramatically and for the worse. One-twenty and twenty-three or through twenty-three in chapter 2:17, both seem to suggest Paul is anticipating that his present sufferings are likely to climax in his martyrdom. He's expecting the end of his life. He describes his imprisonment in 1:29 and 30 as a conflict of suffering. Things are hard. He's languishing in chains, enduring significant privation with the shadow of his own execution looming over him, and yet, all of that notwithstanding, untouched and undiminished by it all, still he overflows with thanksgiving to God for the Philippian Christians. In evaluating our own appreciation of the grace of God, we need to ask ourselves not just if we remember to be thankful when we pray, we need to ask if thankfulness and gratitude overflows in every prayer no matter our present circumstances. If our circumstances notwithstanding, we are still able to trace the goodness and grace of God and give Him thanks.

Joy Fuels his Thanksgiving

The Godwardness of his thanksgiving, the saturation of his prayers with thanksgiving, then the third lesson: joy fuels his thanksgiving. You see that in the text, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer", how? What is it that animates his thankful praying? "I make my prayer," he says, "with joy." Joy sings in all his prayers. Matthew Henry again, "As holy joy is the heart and soul of thankful praise, so thankful praise is the lip and language of holy joy." Isn't that beautiful? "As holy joy is the heart and soul of thankful praise so thankful praise is the lip and language," the voice, the song of a heart filled with joy at the grace of God. Paul has learned to trace the fingerprints and the handiwork of God in every circumstance, to follow them back—every blessing—to trace them back to their source in God so that even in the confinement and isolation of his Roman prison he has reasons in abundance for joy in God's grace. In fact, as you probably know, joy is one of the major themes of Paul's letter. Philippians is suffused with this note of joy. It's remarkable given Paul's circumstances. Clearly he is no dispassionate Stoic, cold and unfeeling, someone for whom emotional entanglements are things to be at all costs avoided.

Not at all. Sixteen times in fact, in Philippians, Paul will use a word for joy or one of its cognates. He doesn't merely talk about his own joy either. He urges it as a normal component to the Christian life upon the Philippians and upon all of us who read his letter. So chapter 2 verses 17 and 18, "I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise, you also should be glad and rejoice with me." Three verse 1, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord." It's a command, "To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and it is safe for you." Or four and verse 4, most famously, "Rejoice in the Lord. I say it again, rejoice."

In other words, joy like this is not simply an idiosyncrasy of the Pauline temperaments. It's not that he's upbeat and it just comes naturally. You know, they say Scottish people are dour and melancholic and Americans, you know, you're all so very upbeat and optimistic and can-do and that might be true. That's not what Paul is talking about. He's not saying, "Give full vent to your natural inclinations, you upbeat, happy Philippians."

Joy: A Birthright of the Child of God, a Mark in the Midst of Affliction

Not at all. In fact, like Paul the Philippians will face real hardship and suffering, but he's saying if the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ has gripped your heart, regardless of your natural temperament, your cultural background, joy will enflame your heart and find expression on your lips as you give praise and thanks to God regardless of your circumstances. "This is for you," in other words. Joy: joy in God the Father in His adopting love, joy in Jesus Christ who gave Himself to make you His, joy in the Holy Spirit who takes the work of Jesus and has brought it into your life and made it a reality, joy in pardoning grace, joy in persevering grace, joy in the promises of heaven, and joy in its final possession. Joy from first to last is the birthright of every child of God.

Does the grace of joy animate, and give lip and language, to thanksgiving? Or have your "thank yous" become a mere exercise, become lip-service, and now no longer heart-service? Have, perhaps, your circumstances blotted out from your view, have you allowed your circumstances to obscure from your view the great truth still standing behind and above and over them all, that God is sovereign, working out His purposes, working every trial-your sorest trial-for your good and His eternal glory?

"Judge not the Lord by feeble sense/ But trust Him for His grace/ Behind a frowning providence/ He hides a smiling face." You may be in the valley, engulfed in the shadows, and you cannot see the light. Remember, over the lip of the horizon the sun is still shining, and one day it will rise and penetrate your gloom. The promises of God are sure. Fuel, learn to fuel the furnace of joy with gospel truth and gracious promises so that in every circumstance your praises might not be mere lip-service but heart-service, also.

Three Reasons for Paul's Thanksgiving

Three lessons from Paul's thanksgiving, then secondly, three reasons for Paul's thanksgiving. Here are his motives, verses 5-8. Why is he so thankful? Well we can sum it up in one word: he is thankful for the Philippians. Here we see Paul the pastor. He loves them. Over and over again we see that, don't we, in the reminder to them that he is praying for them constantly? In verse 7 that he holds them in his heart. In verse 8 he yearns for them with the affection of Jesus Christ. Here is a pastor who loves them. And so every triumph of theirs gives him joy, and every trial of theirs brings him to his knees at the throne of grace. How you need to pray that God would give you pastors like that. And yet, what is it about the Philippians, particularly, that makes Paul so very thankful?

Thankful for Past Partnership

First, he is thankful for past partnership. Verse 5, "I thank my God because of your partnership." That word, by the way, partnership, *koinonia*, could mean communion, it could mean fellowship. Often we talk about fellowship to mean little more than a cup of coffee. When we talk about the sports game the other evening that's not fellowship in the New Testament sense. It really means participation, partnership together, sharing, standing in solidarity with one another. And in Philippians it has four components to it. There's partnership in the message. They stand together, partnering together, in the gospel. They've been united, not just with Jesus Christ through the gospel, but with one another.

It means partnership in money. In chapter 2 in verse 25 and following we learn the Philippians have sent, along with Epaphroditus, resources, some of their own substance to minister to Paul and to minimize his sufferings. They've opened their pocketbooks, as it were, to help the apostle Paul. Their partnership was not just a supernatural reality, it was a natural reality also as they sent finances to help Paul. Thirdly, it's partnership in mission, not just money. They did send Epaphroditus, a key leader, to be there to love Paul on their behalf. Sinclair Ferguson writes, "Your checkbook is important, but it's not all important." It is, for example, never money wasted when we send people to encourage missionaries, as well as provide them with financial support.

So, partnership in the message, partnership in money, partnership in mission—they send people to stand with Paul, and then finally partnership in maturity. That is to say it is a partnership that is in it together, for the long haul, in the long, slow process, two-steps-forward sometimes and three-steps-back, right, of Christian growth. It was, as Paul puts it in verse 5, a partnership lasting from the first day until now. They haven't backed off. They weren't on again, off again. They were with Paul all the way. One pictures the apostle Paul in that Roman prison cell bringing back to mind the faces of the Philippian congregation. The people that he led to the Lord. Remember, there was Lydia in Acts 16:16-18, praying Lydia

whose heart the Lord opened as Paul preached. There was the Philippian slave girl, the demon-possessed girl, now clothed and in her right mind. There was the Philippian jailer and his family whom the apostle Paul led to Christ and baptized. And there are many others, besides, we are told in Acts 16:40, and all of them are still there giving, and going, and praying in partnership with Paul. They have not backed off. They have been faithful all the way, even to this extremity.

What a delight it must have been to Paul's pastor's-heart to see his beloved Philippians standing firm—that those who first began, continue in partnership with him. Let me plead with you as we begin a new phase of ministry together in First Presbyterian Church to pray not just for me—please pray for me—but let's pray for one another that we will stand united in gospel partnership no matter what: through thick and thin, not on-again off-again, but in the trenches, at the front line of spiritual warfare for the advancement of the Kingdom, in it together in gospel partnership.

Thankful for Future Perseverance

So first he's thankful for past partnership. He knows the Philippians have been with him all the way. Secondly, he's thankful for their future perseverance. Here we come to the most precious, perhaps, certainly the most famous verse in this passage, verse 6, "I am sure of this: He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at day of Jesus Christ." What a precious text that is. Sometimes, truth be told, we don't know if we can keep going. Right? Sometimes we feel like we're at the end of our resources, at the end of our rope. We're out of steam. The finishing line is nowhere in sight. There's still so far to go, and we feel bereft. Well, Paul says to us that in the last analysis if we are clinging to Jesus Christ we do not keep ourselves to the end—we are kept to the end. We do not fuel our own race. Fuel is supplied with each new mile that stretches out before us. "He that began a good work...will complete it." Jesus always finishes what He starts. Praise the Lord that's true. Jesus always finishes what He starts. Becoming a Christian was no mere kick-start to your own best efforts. You're not in this alone. Your stamina, your ability, your giftedness, your determination, your strength—those are not the final measure of whether you'll finish the race: the unbreakable promise, and the unstoppable power of God is. In Christ, by the Holy Spirit, God the Father will infallibly, inevitably, irresistibly, bring you home, believer. He will. He will. Praise God, He will bring you home. That is His promise. His honor is at stake in fulfilling it.

And so Paul overflows with thanksgiving not just because of what he sees in the Philippians past, but because of what he knows about their future: God will bring them home and they will shine like stars in the Kingdom of the Son of God's love. How we need to remember that we are in God's hands. You don't need to worry about where you're going to get the stamina for tomorrow from, or how you're going to make it through the trials you know are coming. The dark clouds are there, you can see them on the horizon, they're coming, "How am I going to

make it through?” You don’t need to worry about where you will get the resources to do so. You are in God’s hands, kept by the power of God unto salvation, ready to be revealed at the last time. So get on with today. Believe today. Obey today. Be faithful today, and tomorrow’s grace will be supplied tomorrow. “He who began a good work in you will, He will complete it.” Praise God.

Thankful for Present Participation

He’s thankful for past partnership and future perseverance, and finally, and this is really my final finally, he’s thankful for their present participation. He’s thankful that they’re, they’ve been with him in the trenches, and they’re still there. Verses 7 and 8, “It’s right for me to feel this way about you all because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.” Remember those extraordinary pictures. Some of you will remember at the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, when the solidarity movement was sweeping those nations, and the people would link arms and sing in the face of tanks and guns, and communism fell. It was extraordinary. That is what Paul is saying the Philippians have done with him in his imprisonment. In the crucible of suffering they have linked arms with him, and sing out the good news of Jesus Christ, and have defied the world, and the flesh and the devil, and seen the Kingdom of God advanced. Solidarity with Paul in his sufferings, and solidarity with Paul in his ministry. Ministry, in other words, was not something they were simply content to let the apostle Paul get on with. He is the apostle, after all. That’s his job. He’s the professional. We’re the religious consumers, he’s the provider of religious good and services, right? That’s what preachers do. They provide the goods and services and congregations consume. Well, no one told the Philippians that.

Living in the Grip of Joyful Thankfulness: Praise and Service

The gospel message that drove Paul to lay every down for the glory of Jesus Christ began to be replicated in their lives as they gave themselves, the Philippian believers, for the same cause, enduring, very much, the same trials. With Paul, they stood together for the defense and confirmation of the gospel. You know, when the good news about Jesus really begins to get a grip of our hearts and lives it not only produces thankfulness in the form of verbal praise, it produces a life that it permeated with thankfulness that finds expression in Christian service—not in the programmatic kind, necessarily, not in some formal ministry or other—but in the quiet Christian heart that looks for the new face every Lord’s day, and makes it their ministry to love them and welcome them well. In the Christian family that opens their home and practices hospitality, sharing even the little they have to be a blessing to others. In the maturer believer who looks for a younger Christian and offers to meet with them once a week to read the Bible and pray, and to provide discipleship. Quietly seeking ways to mentor, and minister, and serve. A heart gripped by gratitude cannot resist the call to serve.

You remember, the Heidelberg Catechism is often described as having three sections—guilt, grace, and gratitude: guilt, talking about our sin and misery and need of a savior, grace, outlining the provision of God for sinners in Jesus Christ, gratitude describes what? Not just the words we say, but the life we live—the life of obedience and service. If you live in the grip of joyful thankfulness, because of the gospel of grace, you will praise and you will serve. May the Lord help us to do that in partnership together, through thick and thin, all the way to the end, for the glory and renown of the name of Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Our Father, we bless You for our Savior who endured the suffering of the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High for the joy set before Him. We thank You for the example of the apostle Paul, who imitates Christ. Help us to imitate him, imitating Christ. Generate and kindle anew in our hearts joy in the good news. Make it animate our thanksgiving, and cause our thanksgiving to be more than words, but also to be a life of joyful, glad-hearted service for the honor of our Savior's name, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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