

Friends & Partners

Philippians 1:1-6

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Turn with me in the Book of Philippians. We are starting a new sermon series today, "Our Joy in Christ." We're going to be looking at the Book of Philippians over the next several months looking at our joy in Christ. Now, as Randy Lovelace, our team lead pastor, has moved on to a new call, I'm what you got. It'll be a blessing to be here. But I wanted to inform you of some of the initial steps the session has taken. Between now and the end of December, we are going to have a teaching team made up as myself serving as one of your pastors. We're also going to have a visiting preacher preaching twice a month. His name is Dan Pasorelli. He's an associate pastor at Chapelgate Presbyterian Church as well as the president of Metro Baltimore Seminary. So he and I will primarily be preaching through Philippians. Occasionally, we'll have Rob Gicking, who is our director of youth and family, who will be graduating this fall from Metro Baltimore Seminary. So we're giving him opportunities to preach God's word as well. But together, we will be looking at Paul's letter to the church in Philippi.

And Paul has warm affection for this church. This letter is one of friendship. If you were to maybe compare and contrast it to one of the many other letters written by Paul, he may get into argumentation and fleshing out the content of the gospel and describing the implications of what that means for the church. But here is particularly a letter to a church where although there is some—division is too strong of a word. There is some murmuring, I guess you could say, between two ladies of the church that he names, and we'll talk about that later in the series. But for the most part, this is truly an affectionate letter of friendship. But it's also a letter that highlights their partnership together in the advance of the gospel.

So follow along as I read from God's word looking at Philippians 1:1-6.

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.

[ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, we rejoice in your word that brings life to the testimony of Jason, the sharing of your word moving him to repentance and faith, celebrating your love for him, the love that is poured out on Christ. Likewise, as we look at your word this morning, we see your love poured out on Christ to your church here in Philippi these many, many years ago and to even us, your church here at Columbia Presbyterian Church. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear of your grace and your peace found in Jesus Christ. We pray this in His name. Amen.

So you can have friendship but lack partnership. Joy can be shared, but you actually can lack a unity of purpose together. And on the flip side, you can have partnership but lack friendship. The unity of purpose might be agreed upon, but joy, is that present? Maybe. Maybe not. Of course, it's rare to have

both. We may have experiences of it in glimpses or starts and stops.

But in the Book of Philippians, we see friendship and partnership between the Apostle Paul and the Philippian church. And this series that we will be embarking on will look at what is the basis of their friendship? And what compels them as partners? And as the series is seeking to capture many different threads and themes woven throughout the whole letter, there is a way of seeing Philippians as our joy in Christ. And that plays out in my life as an individual, but it plays out in the life of a community of a church.

And I'd like to begin—we're doing a normal kind of introduction today. The beginning of Paul's letter really continues on through verse 11, but we're going to take this week and next week to work through these verses. And I'd like to begin with just a little bit of background information which helps us better understand the context of the church there in Philippi. We can explore the dynamics between Paul and his relationship with them and—just barely scratch the surface, but just as we introduce some major themes found in the letter.

This letter to the Philippians follows many social conventions of Paul's day. It features that would be easily understood as a letter of friendship between them. And we might write letters very similarly, even today. It kind of carries a cadence. It carries a flow when we might write a letter, if we write letters, of course. But something to the effect of, "Hello. How are you? This is why I'm writing to you. This is what is going on in my life. This is what I understand is going on in your life. Let me know what's going on with you. Let me know what's going on with other folks that we might know together. Let me tell you about my plans. Let me tell you about how I might conclude with just a sweet remembrance, words of affection and comfort to one another that expresses and captures that friendship shared between us." That's the gist of any good letter, right? It's known between parties who know each other. This is not a formal letter that Paul is writing.

And here, we see—just right out of the gates at verse 1, we see that Paul and Timothy are writing to them. Now Paul, who earlier in his life went by the name Saul, was an accomplished Jewish Pharisee. And earlier in his life, he participated in some of the early persecution against the early Christians at the hands of their fellow countrymen. Ken even mentioned Stephen, one of the first men called to serve as a deacon in the church. The people who stoned him handed their coats to Saul. So Paul is involved in this early persecution. And yet, there is an amazing moment in his life, and we read about it in Acts 9 where Paul is converted to Jesus Christ. He's converted to Christianity. He goes from persecuting Christians to being a follower of Christ. And likewise, we see in the telling in the Book of Acts where he's also commissioned. Commission is an apostle to the Gentiles, which Gentiles are the non-Jewish world.

Timothy was already a follower of Jesus when Paul met him, and he became a fellow worker with Paul. He was a companion. He traveled with him all over the place. Timothy would have been well-known to the Philippians as well. And, of course, as we get into chapter 2 in the weeks ahead, we will discuss more of Timothy's role with the Philippian church.

But here in verse 1, Paul identifies himself as well as Timothy as servants of Christ. Now, sometimes in the New Testament, the word for servant can be translated "bon servant," which is someone of servitude who purchases freedom but maintains a voluntary relationship of servitude. Here, the word is more jarring in that it is the word for slave. Paul is communicating something counter intuitive to the natural assumptions of what is honorable and what it means to be free, especially in the context of a city that is benefiting from the privileges of being a Roman colony. And these things are the backdrop, and they are woven throughout the letter that will be fleshed out more and more as we go along. But to identify himself as a slave of Christ.

Now, they are writing, of course, to the church in Philippi. Philippi is an ancient city that has its origins with Philip of Macedon. My name is Phillip, if you didn't know that. I am not named for Phillip of Macedon. But Philip, which is where the word Philippi comes from, was Alexander the Great's father. And he himself was a great conqueror as well of that world. But many, many years later, the area was conquered again by Antoni and Octavian. All up in Rome, all of the warring that's happening, Octavian later became Augustus Caesar. When they established Philippi, they established it as a Roman colony, and they populated it with former army veterans, perhaps the very armies that defeated the armies in that area under Antony and Octavian.

But being a colony, it was under the provincial jurisdiction of Rome and privileged her residents with a status of Roman citizenship. People could own land, and the city was exempted from significant taxation. The citizens, likewise, would have known, and smelled, and seen, and very likely participated in the cult of the emperor, performing homage to Caesar, demonstrating allegiances to Rome. This was kind of the warp and woof of the life there. And the city was along an important trade route called the agnation way. This weaving of what it meant to be a Roman colony commercially with government and oversight, these things, the very identity of the person living in Philippi would have understood themselves as Roman.

There is some debate among scholars, where actually Paul is writing from. Without going into too many of the weeds, I'll just share a little bit about kind of the view that I tend to agree with. But I believe Paul is writing from Rome in his imprisonment, the very final imprisonment that he's in. I think it's probably a little bit earlier in his imprisonment there in Rome because the letter itself suggests that he's hopeful that he is released at some point so that he can return and visit Philippi. But it's in the early 60s, and he's writing from a prison in Rome.

I think there are two, briefly, internal references that I'd point to that kind of suggest this. In verse 13, Paul mentions how the gospel has been made known throughout the whole imperial guard. This imperial guard was an agency of Caesar. Some translations may say the praetorium. Now, praetorium could mean "palace" as well. So some people suggest it's other places in the empire. But the whole imperial guard would be an interesting way of explaining some kind of backwoods outpost of the guard, rather being in the centralized hub of Rome itself. Another internal reference later in chapter 4 verse 22, Paul closes his letter with a greeting, where he even specifically mentions, "The greeting of saints from the household of Caesar." So, again, Caesar's family kind of lived at different parts of the empire but understanding the backdrop of the context of Philippi being a colony, it would be quite amazing and quite encouraging to hear how the gospel was truly advancing in the Roman capital.

Now, we read an account of this church being established in Paul's second missionary journey. As you follow along in the Book of Acts, there's three main journeys that Paul makes, and this is on his second one where he's revisiting areas and encouraging the churches. Paul is—on his way, he receives a vision to go into Macedonia, and on the way, he enters Philippi, which is that leading city in the Macedonian province. We don't know how long he stays. The text merely says, "some days." But we can gather that it was enough to establish close relationships and to establish this church.

Paul experienced success with some people in Philippi becoming Christians. We see Lydia, who was a merchant, and potentially a very wealthy merchant as she traded in purple goods, which suggests the quality and also the luxury of the items. And Paul is there and welcomed into her household. So again, suggesting her wealth of just seeing her responsibility to her household. As well in chapter 16 of Acts, we hear of the conversion of the jailer. Because not only is Paul experiencing success in Philippi, but he's also experiencing the disruption that comes along with preaching the gospel. As he is put in prison, people are saying that he's disturbing the city. And so he is put in prison briefly. There is an earthquake,

and the jailer is distraught thinking the very people that are under his charge have escaped. He is about to fall on his sword, and Paul calls out and says, "Don't. We are still in here." And in that process, he shares the gospel, and that jailer himself becomes a Christian.

And we see in the backdrop of the very establishment of this church in this Roman colony, we see God working throughout the unfolding expanse and advancement of the gospel. If you remember from Acts 1, "You will be my witnesses to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth," this expanse that the church is making going about disturbing the cities that it goes to. And in that imprisonment also comes pictures of sufferings, which will play into this letter as well.

But here, Paul and Timothy are addressing the church. And he uses the term "saints," "holy ones," "those who are set apart," which is a way to describe the congregation of believers there. But what's beautiful about what he's doing here in this kind of initial greeting is that he includes additional groups of people. Two, in fact. He calls "with the overseers and the deacons." The overseers are people who watch over. They are managers. They are leaders in a sense. It's a Greek understanding of management, if you will. It's where the word—it comes from the word that we might get Episcopalian, if you're familiar with maybe an Anglican background of Christianity. Episcopalian—some English translations, that's where we get the word "bishop" from. So the idea of overseers being a function of leadership in overseeing the church.

But what Paul is doing is something unique to maybe the Greco Roman world. He's emphasizing that these overseers and deacons are with the saints. They are not over the saints. They are not a further class separated from the saints. They are fulfilling a function that is for the purpose of the entire body. And likewise, the second group, deacons, are the ones who serve. Now, here in this particular letter, we don't really know if these are formal titles in the church at the time of Paul's writing. It's kind of hard to conclude that, per say. But they do refer to the functions within the body. And whatever their role was specifically in how they developed, it is—I can't stress that enough. Paul is saying something about what it means to be in leadership, but with and among the people.

He moves on into verse 2, and he uses a common greeting, "Grace and peace." Here, grace as a greeting is not necessarily referring to the technical term for salvation or God's unmerited favor that is found in His redemption, but rather it's a broader term, this goodwill posture, this gracious care, this desire for good will to be upon you. And then he couples that with the word "peace," which serves as an extension that he desires that peaceful harmony within their personal relationships. But Paul being from Hebrew background, you can also imagine that he is bringing with him that fuller understanding of shalom. This shalom upon those receiving the letter, the wholeness, the fullness. Not just the absence of hostility, but the fullness of what peace is all meant to be, the thriving, the flourishing among them and between them.

Taken together, he's really just saying, "Hello. How are you?" But also, he's saying so much more because Paul places these common greetings, these terms that would just be in letters like you do with letters and emails that you get. You quickly skim over and get to the meat of the matter, right? But even in these moments, he's saying something to the church. He's framing grace and peace in terms of the triune God, who is active, who's involved in the lives of both the writer and the audience. And together is the occasion of this letter of friendship, our communion together, our unity in the bond of peace that we have with Christ.

And as he moves into the greeting, he is showing his heart. He's showing his affection for this church. Looking at verses 3 through 6 now. His heart is one of prayerful remembrance, but so much more. It's not just a recalling of the mind, but rather a warm gladness, that joy that comes also with the remembrance. Paul is centering his remembrance and his joy not just in his own kind of sentimentality

or nostalgia, but rather he's rooting that in his thanksgiving to God. To be thankful, to be full of gratitude for their relationship, he is bearing witness not only in greeting them, but he's recalling the stories, recalling the very nature of their relationship and their history together by God's activity, by God's grace and peace among them.

He goes on to say even more of what the reason is for this thanksgiving, this reason for remembrance and joy. And that comes in verse 5. He says, "Because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." He is remembering on the one hand the very first visit to Philippi, seeing how the people responded to the message of the gospel there, being welcomed by Lydia and her household, encouraging the church there, and then leaving, and then potentially beginning the exchange of letters and certainly continuation of their prayers for one another. He mentions this partnership again in chapter 4, where he specifically mentions his thanks for a gift that the Philippian church has given to him in his time of need while in prison. And even then, it's a picture of how they have provided his needs many times.

So what would be common in the first century in a letter of friendship is what we see here. There is affection and friendship with one another, but there is sweet partnership of mutuality. There is giving and receiving. There is a sense of mutual need and mutual fulfillment that they have together as they partner together in the gospel.

This background plays out very important as we unfold the themes as we go through the letter. And we'll, of course, spend more time as we go. I'm speaking very broadly and quickly today. But the backdrop will be very helpful in navigating some of these themes. So first off—and you see it in the sermon title that we have. A key theme of the Book of Philippians is joy. It's rejoicing. It's a gladness of heart. Now, sometimes the word can be a greeting. We even looked at that last week looking at 2 Corinthians 13. You might say, "Rejoice," as a way of saying hello. But it's something that is true of your inner character, your inner experience of sharing that together with one another. Paul's remembrance and what is directed in their mutual affection and thanks to God will be a theme surely throughout the whole letter. The words are repeated almost every chapter. It's woven throughout the whole letter.

Another key theme of Paul's letter is indeed just the gospel. And that's something we'll flesh out along the way as well. Paul speaks of the word "gospel" nine times in this letter. It is a center point and a focal point for him in certainly all of his letters, but here in particular. Because it's a letter of friendship, he actually just kind of presumes that they know what it means. He doesn't spend a lot of time in this letter clarifying the content of the gospel. He uses it as a shorthand, as a summary of what they know and share between them. But since this is a letter of friendship, that makes sense, right? That they know what he means by that. But it will be worth our while to expand on it while we go along. But what's key of what he says in connecting everything to the gospel is another aspect of what he's sharing in the letter about his partnership, that they are advancing in the gospel. So there's the advancement of the gospel in the regions and spreading Christianity through evangelism, but there's also a component of advancing the gospel in how you are growing and maturing in the gospel. And Paul has great care for that in their lives, that they understand it, that they live according to it.

One scholar said it this way, however, as we think about the shorthand of the gospel. He says this. "The absolute heart of Paul's theological enterprise is the triune God effecting salvation in Christ. He's bringing about salvation in Jesus. In doing so, he's creating a people for his name whose present existence is shortly eschatological." And what he means by that, eschatological, is not necessarily just how it's all going to end, or what does the Bible say about prophecy and end times. No. Eschatological does deal with the end. But thoroughly, how is the end in light of the present? So it's predicated on the death and the resurrection of Christ, and this gift of the Spirit is bringing the future into the present.

God's people are both already and not yet. So, for example, they are fully mature and maturing. They are completely justified, and there is something to be said at the end when there is final justification. Now, there's not progressive justification. There is we are justified in Christ, but as we are already in Christ, we are growing and being sanctified and progressing in that salvation that is ours in Him. It is an already, not yet as they live the life of the further future in the present, awaiting God's final wrap-up, the final consummation of that salvation in Christ. The gospel is a key theme that is in all of Paul's letters, and it is an important key—the very glue that holds this letter together.

An aspect of the gospel that he goes into with more detail is another theme that is found in this letter, and that is union with Christ. God's saving work in Jesus Christ is certainly implied throughout the letter. And all of God's salvation through Jesus can be understood in light of our union with Christ. So, for example, the various aspects of when we say God's salvation, they include many benefits, many aspects of what that entails. It entails the forgiveness of our sins. It involves how we are justified by faith, that we are made righteous even though we are not righteous of our own accord. Our salvation involves how He is making us more like Him, our sanctification, being made more in the image of Christ, having that deeper renewal of who we already are in Him. It includes our adoption. Not only are we legally forgiven and justified, but we are brought into God's family to be a member, a son, a daughter of the Most High, a son and a daughter of the King. And in that is how He effects salvation through His redemption, the experience of that salvation in our renewal and the ongoing intercession and the daily care of our Lord and Savior as He sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty interceding for you and for me.

All of these beautiful aspects of the gospel of God's salvation to His people is like light being refracted through a prism. When the light is shot through the prism, you can see all the wavelengths of light, and we see it with the colors of the rainbow. And yet altogether, we see those bands of light can be held out as our union with Christ, who we are in Him, what He is doing through us, and how we are being made more and more into the image of Christ. Believing the gospel of Jesus, that is the gospel. Believing that Jesus's life, His death, and His very resurrection is what brings us also to share in that death and resurrection, to experience God's goodness and mercy and to know His salvation.

And this beautiful promise is in light of verse 6. Read it with me. Verse 6, Paul goes on to say, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you shall bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." The day of Christ is the future, the not yet, but what is secure, what is foundational, what is rooted, what is accomplished, what can never be thwarted, what can never be taken, what can never be undermined, what can never be corrupted is rooted in Christ. What He begins, He finishes.

This is God's promise of His salvation. And this letter carries these beautiful themes of time. It's beyond my understanding and comprehension. But I do know this. This is what changed Saul's life to Paul. You see, Paul, being a student of God's word, he knew resurrection was true. His hope was on resurrection. But he believed resurrection was at the end. And when you believe resurrection is at the end, and then you are confronted with somebody who's been resurrected, you got to rearrange your categories a little bit. You're confronted with a new paradigm. You're confronted with a new reality of what is God doing? And so we see the already, not yet being woven throughout scripture—this letter of Philippians. What is present now, what is future to come, and what bearing does the future have on my life today? How can I understand God's glory when I'm suffering today? Christ's resurrection's power is how I see that and experience that in my present reality. We'll go through that more and more as we go through Philippians.

Another key theme in this letter is the contrast between humility and glory. This will be important as we work through in the context of being a Roman colony. Rome had a very specific philosophy of what glory and honor was, and it was not through humility. Humility comes from the word "humiliation." You

do not voluntarily put yourself in a place of humiliation. Someone who is more honorable, someone who is stronger, someone who is better than you, above you puts you in humility. And here, Paul is realigning the categories by saying in the gospel, in our union with Christ, glory comes through humility because Christ's glory is found in His humility on the death on the cross, and for us to walk in that path.

This leads us to another key theme for our time today, the Christian life. Paul has warm affection for them as brothers and sisters, but that warm affection is rooted in what he longs for them to experience in the fullness of Christ. Look at chapter 3. He is wanting them to advance in the gospel. He says in verse 13, "Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize." The already, not yet. The prize is won, and it is to be lived out and to be pursued. This is the life of the Christian.

This life of the Christian also is done in community, of course. And we see this as another important theme that's woven through all of these, which is unity. Now, we've started by saying a very important theme of Philippians is joy, and that is truly the case. But one thing that I personally love about Philippians is that it is the very basis for how we have our friendship and partnership together. What's compelling us to be friends? What's driving us to be partners? And it always comes back to Paul. It always comes back for him as Jesus. Do you see Jesus? Do you follow Jesus? Do you see the way of the cross? Do you see how He has humbled Himself? We'll look at this in a few weeks as we look at chapter 2. The very example of Christ and how He has emptied Himself, this is the path of glory. This is the already, not yet. This is how we share in our union with Christ with one another. This is the Christian life.

And so just for concluding with some implications of this, what I wanted to do today with giving background information, giving some key themes just to give you a sense of direction of where we're headed. But it's beautiful today both in how it worked providentially in honoring our deacons in the ministry that they have, a ministry of service. Again, in the backdrop of Rome, there is no honor in service, and yet through Christ, it is readjusted and realigned and redefined.

The implications of these themes, the implications of what we're looking at with our joy in Christ, just a few suggestions. One, we see here in his affection right out of the gate in verse 3 through 6, but it carries over next week in verses 7 through 11, is how we pray. How are we praying for one another? We certainly are praying with being aware of needs and intercession in that way, supplications. But Paul is offering a way of prayer that is fuller than just seeking God to do something. We can sometimes minimize God's power by just trying to use Him as a vending machine. "Do this. Do that. Please. I need you for that. Do that for this person." And all of those things are beautiful. God hears our prayers, and He's present. But there's something of what God's doing in us as we remember those who we were praying for, and to recall that with great joy of how we're sharing that together in Christ.

It certainly has implications for joy. And joy, brothers and sisters, has nothing to do with circumstances. Joy certainly can overlap with happiness, but those are separate things. A Christian who experiences tremendous suffering, tremendous unhappiness, according to the world's standards, can be full of joy. To have their sense of contentment, their sense of—even their sense of glory defined in terms of what Paul is saying here in the letter to the Philippians brings about a true reframing of what brings us joy. Because when we're reframed in the gospel, it's not only what brings us joy. It's how we live by joy for the sake of others, and we share together in that unity. And due to our union in Christ, we share together in communion, which is what we do when we share the meal, as we're about to do. We are living in the already, not yet when we take the bread and the juice. The Spirit is active. The Spirit is involved. And we are remembering His sacrifice on the cross, but we are remembering and living and

embodying the resurrection. Our union with Christ is shared together with our communion with one another. And that, my friends, is mysterious, but it brings me to worship. It brings me to a place of confidence, because again in verse 6, that place of confidence is in the work that God is doing. When I am focused on the work that I'm doing, or that I think I'm doing, or that I think I can do on my own strength, my own ability, my own capability, the confidence that I can rest in is not of my own. The confidence that I can rest in is in Jesus Christ.

This word is for us this morning, brothers and sisters. It is a confidence in the work that God is doing in your own walk. But there is another perspective of the walk of others as we think about those that bring remembrance to us in our prayers, because those remembrances of prayers of joy can often also bring tears of sorrow and grief. But this promise in verse 6 is a beautiful promise as we look to those who we love, the sorrows we may carry, maybe family members or friends who may have professed faith in Christ at one point in their life, and for whatever reason they're drifting away. Whatever reason they're unsure of their faith today, whatever reason that they are clearly articulating that they're saying, "I don't want anything to do with Jesus. I don't want anything to do with the church. I don't want anything to do with you." For whatever reason, our prayers of joy that are founded in the confidence of the work of Christ, even there, He is present in our sorrows because we're holding fast to that promise that what God begins, He completes.

So just a couple questions as we close and move into meditating on the supper together. Are we as Christians cultivating relationships in the church that are life-giving friendships? I hear it in your emails. Well, I read them. But I hear it in your words in our conversations. We live in a time in history where we are the most connected ever to anybody on this planet, and yet we are more isolated. We experience deep sorrow and loneliness, and we can be with people. We can be doing things with people. And so the gospel that Paul talks about, this very joy in Christ is what brings freshness and nourishment to our souls, that we might have life-giving friendships with one another because of our shared unity in Christ. And that has to be coupled with the other things that he talks about in this letter. But it's not just friendship, but it's the partnership in advancing the gospel, advancing the gospel in the world and the taking on, the receiving, the embodying of the gospel in our lives that we are reflecting more and more God's goodness and kindness, that we are reflecting the very image of Christ to one another. And that brings much joy in our friendships, much joy in our working together for the glory of God and the ministry of His church.

And so as we go on this journey, our joy in Christ, the gospel invites us to more than friendship and something more than just people who complete us or who we gravitate toward, but rather it's so much more that what God is doing in us compels us and moves us forward so that we might be the gospel for those around us, being the gospel for our brothers and sisters, being the gospel to a walking world. Let's ask God to help us in those things. And may He grow you. May He grow us in this season as we look at our joy in Christ through the Book of Philippians this fall. Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, we rejoice and give thanks. And we ask you, Holy Spirit, to move in us, to powerfully work in the ways that you have begun. May we hold fast to what we have already attained, and may we strive forward, striving with the grace that is given to us in Jesus Christ. Holy Spirit, help us to understand these things. Help us as you mature us in our faith and help us as we grow in our joy. We pray these things in Jesus's name. Amen.