

Sermon – 30/08/2009 pm

Fellowship in the Gospel

Study Text: Philippians 1:3-5

The prayer of the apostle Paul in this letter to the Philippians both comforted and challenged me when we were in mission overseas. The words partnership/fellowship in the gospel reminded me of those back home praying for us. We had been sent out to live and work in what was initially a strange and difficult place. We persevered in those early days knowing that partners in the gospel were praying for us.

The prayers of those partners also kept us aware of the reason we were in that place. They were praying not just for us to endure but to be faithful in sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul's words in I Thessalonians 2:8 also gave us direction at that time: *we loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.*

From his prison cell in Rome Paul wrote this letter to the church at Philippi. After greeting them in the *grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* he told the members of this church how he has been praying for them. Paul's prayer is remarkable in that he begins by thanking God. He does not begin by asking God to get him out of the cold, dark, smelly cell where he was confined in chains.

Paul's prayer is also remarkable in that he does not even pray about himself, nor does he request prayer for himself. His prayer is about others. His prayer is fuelled by memories and thoughts of fellow believers in the church at Philippi. Paul will later urge them to look out for the interests of others and especially the interests of Christ and his church. Paul was a man who practiced what he preached.

Thanksgiving

The first word after the greeting is *eucharisto*, meaning I give thanks; *I give thanks to God* (1:3). The root of this word you will notice is *charis* or grace. Grace as we know is the unmerited favour of God, but it also had the meaning of giving thanks, or being gracious. Paul knew the grace of God and he was confident the saints at Philippi did also. He wrote *you are partakers with me of grace* (1:7).

Those who receive the grace of God in Christ Jesus will be gracious and thankful people. What changes do you notice when a person is born again of the Holy Spirit? Do you look to hear them say the right words, to articulate orthodox doctrine? Confession of faith is necessary of course, but do you not also look to changes in life, to signs of God's grace overflowing into gracious living? Believers must be thankful and joyful people, and they must take their place in the fellowship.

Did Paul remember the Philippians every time he prayed, or did he pray every time he remembered them (1:3)? (Some actually take these words to mean that Paul was thanking God for their remembering him). Certainly he remembered them in every prayer because he wrote *in every prayer of mine* (1:4). It may be that he prayed for them whenever he remembered them also. Paul was ready to pray anywhere at anytime. He was in prison, chained to Roman soldier, when he wrote this letter. He prayed when he was in jail with Silas at Philippi.

You might say that Paul had plenty of time to pray when he was in prison. But you on the other hand are a busy person and find it difficult to get time to pray. Do you think it would be easier for you to pray in prison! For Paul prayer was not about having the time but of making prayer a priority. Do you find it difficult finding things to pray about? Again the apostle would be shocked to hear such an excuse. Prayer is not easy. We must learn how to pray and we are doing so as we look into the life of the apostle Paul.

Something striking in these few verses is the number of times we read 'all' and 'every'. Paul did not remember them sometimes, and pray for them sometimes. He remembered them often and with great affection; and he prayed for them every time he did so. He did not just remember a few special people there but he prayed *for you all with joy* (1:4). We see a servant of Jesus Christ who was serious about prayer and about the fellowship.

Whenever Paul prayed his first thoughts were of God, God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. He thanked the Triune God for the faith and love of the saints (Colossians 1:4). He thanked God for the church or the fellowship, for it is the body of Christ, the body through which he makes his glory known on earth and in heaven.

Joy

A chorus the children sing reminds us of how we find true joy. The J is for Jesus – Jesus first and yourself last and others in between. As Paul remembered the brothers and sisters at Philippi and thanked God for them he felt joy in his heart. He had these people in his heart (1:7). His outward circumstances were not at all conducive to joy but Paul looked beyond those circumstances. He looked to the Lord and to the evidence of God's grace in his life and in the lives of others.

Paul first went to Philippi because the Holy Spirit called him to preach the gospel in this city. A businesswoman, a Roman soldier and a slave girl heard the gospel and believed. They began worshipping together and continued to do so, along with new converts, after ten years. God had wonderfully blessed this fellowship. They gave themselves first to the Lord, and then to one another, including Paul (II Corinthians 8:5). Paul saw how God's grace had been given to this church and that they continued in this grace.

A servant of the Lord can have no greater joy than to see than to see such evidence of God's abounding grace. This church continued to send him gifts in his time of need – *a sweet smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God* (4:18). They also gave out of their poverty to fellow believers who were suffering in Jerusalem. Paul, however, was not just thanking these saints for their gift but was thanking God for the hearts that prompted them to give, hearts that stood firmly in the grace of God.

Joy is a key theme of this letter. It is not a surprise therefore to find it in this opening prayer. The apostle was filled with joy as he remembered the church at Philippi, how it had begun and how it was continuing in the grace of God. He rejoiced in their salvation. Jesus said there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10). If there is joy in heaven should there not be joy on earth also. There certainly was joy in the heart of the apostle Paul.

What brings the greatest joy to your heart? Parents are filled with joy when their child starts to walk or to talk. They are thrilled when they get an award at school or at sport. They are thrilled when they get a job or get married. It is right to be happy and thank God for such things, but what do you want most of all for your child or someone you love? Remember what brings rejoicing in heaven.

Fellowship

The Greek word *koinonia* is variously translated as fellowship, participation, partnership or communion – even in the same version of the Bible. The word has the sense of something in common. Sometimes a group of people who share a common philosophy get together in a commune. Some Christians want to live with other Christians in a commune so they can have greater communion. We do not have to live in a commune but we should be having communion or fellowship with other believers.

As believers our communion is based on a person, not a teaching or philosophy. And that person is not just human; he is Jesus Christ the Son of God. Our fellowship is in the gospel (1:4), in the good news about Jesus Christ. Our fellowship is in the Spirit, the Spirit of God. Our fellowship is based upon our belief in Jesus Christ and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a fellowship of the Spirit (2:1). *Where two or three gather together in my name I am there in the midst of them* said Jesus (Matthew 18:20).

People get together for all sorts of things. They gather at the pub or the club to share a drink or to join in some gambling. Their common interest is drinking or gambling. People gather at the races to watch the horses, to gamble and to drink. Again this is their common interest. Why then do people gather in church on Sunday? To the unsaved there is no reason. No drinking, no gambling, no games, no feasting. What are we here for? They say we must do a better job in advertising and selling ourselves if we want people to come.

Some churches have done just that. How? They have made church like a concert. People come to see and hear a great performance. Top class singers and musicians turn on a good show. Some churches invite celebrities along to liven up their performance. Just listen to the radio or turn on the TV and you will hear and see such things.

‘I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting’ are the closing words of the Apostles Creed. It begins of course with belief in God the Father and Jesus Christ his only begotten Son.

The communion, the fellowship which we call church is based upon our common faith in Jesus Christ. What else did Lydia, the jailer and the slave girl have in common? Did they have fellowship before they believed in Jesus? No. What we have in common is the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord, and the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts. *You are all partakers with me of grace* (1:7).

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