

“Our Partnership in the Gospel”

Philippians 1:1-8

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Dr. Jerry Nelson

They didn't know if he was dead or alive.

The last they had heard he was dying and fearing the worst, they anxiously waited to hear the outcome.

He had a name strange to our ears but not so strange to his family and friends and others of his day

His name was Epaphroditus.

He was part of a small church in the city of Philippi, in the Roman province of Macedonia, which we now know as the country of Greece.

In a small church everyone knows everyone else and believe me they all knew Epaphroditus.

From soon after his conversion he was teaching and leading and doing all he could to help the new church and to help the Apostle Paul, who 10 years earlier had first told them about Jesus.

His love for Paul, his heart for the gospel and his trustworthiness were why he was chosen by the congregation.

Chosen to travel a great distance on foot to take a gift to the Apostle who was in prison.

Many days later the church heard from a traveler in the opposite direction that Epaphroditus had made it to where Paul was but was very sick and apparently dying.

The whole church felt a deep sadness and probably fear.

Not only was one of their own dying but the Apostle Paul himself was in prison awaiting trial that could end in his execution.

The implications of this were both very personal (because they loved Epaphroditus and Paul) and far-reaching (because they had reason to wonder if Christianity would survive without Paul).

To get a better sense of why this situation was so serious I have to take you back ten years before Epaphroditus' trip.

It had been about 25 years since the death and resurrection of Jesus in Israel but there is little reason to think that Epaphroditus or the others in Philippi had even heard of Jesus.

There were a few Jews in the city who worshipped God but most of the residents worshipped the gods of the Roman and Greek cultures.

As far as we know these people had no access at all to the good news of God's love through Jesus.

It was about that time, ten years ago; that a bowlegged little Jew named Paul showed up out of nowhere and caused no end of trouble in the town.

Unknown to Epaphroditus and the others, Paul had been traveling on foot from city to city in Turkey, across the Aegean Sea, telling anyone who would listen about Jesus.

In several of those cities churches got started.

At one point in his missionary work, Paul had wanted to go farther north in Turkey into an area called Bithynia but God stopped him.

God had other plans for Paul **and for Epaphroditus** and the others in Philippi.

And so Paul went to the port city of Troas in Turkey.

Luke in the book of Acts tells us what happened:

Acts 16:9-10 "During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia (remember that Philippi was a leading city in Macedonia) standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, (Luke says) we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."

It's only imagination but I do wonder if Epaphroditus was the man in Paul's vision.

Paul sailed across the Aegean Sea and landed at the port city of Neapolis but apparently went immediately to Philippi, where he caused quite a ruckus.

I doubt Epaphroditus even knew Paul was in town at first.

Paul did what he customarily did, he sought out the Jews who already believed in God and told them that the Messiah-Jesus had come.

Actually he found these Jews down by the town's river, meeting to pray.

Paul talked to them about Jesus and God opened the heart of a businesswoman, named Lydia, to the good news.

She and her family believed and were baptized.

A few days later as they were going the river to pray together again, a slave girl, who had an evil spirit, met them.

The girl's owners were using her to make a lot of money as a fortune-teller.

As Paul and the others passed by she began to yell, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

That had to be a little spooky to the new Christians – how did this slave girl know Paul and even more, how did she know what he was there for.

She didn't meet and yell at them just one day but several days.

Finally Paul was so troubled by her slavery both to her owners and to the evil spirit in her that he turned to her and said, (Acts 16:18) "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the (evil) spirit left her."

Well that's when trouble broke loose.

That's probably when Epaphroditus first heard about this man named Paul because the whole town seems to have gotten involved.

The slave girl's owners grabbed Paul and his partner Silas and dragged them in front of the town authorities.

A crowd gathered and the slave owners, playing on the towns prejudice against Jews, accused Paul of stirring up trouble by advocating illegal ideas.

Well the whole crowd got into it then and the authorities ordered Paul and Silas stripped and beaten severely and thrown into jail.

Many of you know what happened next but can you imagine the impact it had on Epaphroditus when he heard?

Under orders, the jailor put Paul and Silas in an inner cell and also bound their legs in stocks.

What happened next was nothing short of miraculous.

Let's have Luke tell us about it:

Acts 16: 25-34 "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. ²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family.

The next morning after demanding their rights as Roman citizens, Paul and Silas were released.

They went to Lydia's house and encouraged the new believers before they left Philippi.

Paul was only in the town a few days but in those days and out of those raucous events a church was born.

About 5 years later Paul visited the church in Philippi again.

Sometime in those years is when Epaphroditus became a Christian.

Now another 5 years or so later, we are back to where we started. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem and was either in prison in Rome or in another prison on the way to Rome.

And Epaphroditus has been selected by the church to visit Paul in prison to encourage him and to take whatever he needed. In those days prisoners wouldn't even have sufficient food and clothing if family or friends didn't supply them.

Either on the way or after he got to Paul, Epaphroditus got deathly sick – so sick that even Paul thought he was going to die.

- And his family and friends back in Phillip didn't know if he was dead or alive.
- And they didn't know if Paul had been executed or not.
- And they didn't know if their little church would survive in the midst of a culture so hostile to Christianity.

And so Paul wrote a letter to those anxious believers.

And best of all he sent the letter in the hands of the recovered Epaphroditus himself.

It's easy to imagine the relief and the joy as the believers gathered in Lydia's home to see and hear from their favorite son, whom they were so certain they'd never see again.

They couldn't stop asking questions and he was eager to tell them everything he could think of about his experience.

Finally assured that he was okay and that Paul was okay, they asked Epaphroditus to read the letter.

And so he began, Philippians 1:1-8 "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:"

(Epaphroditus paused and looked up at the few leaders in the group and smiled at them with that look that said, 'Yes, he's talking about you.'" Then he went on reading.)

²”Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

(It’s what they heard next that filled them with a holy satisfaction and an even stronger affection for Paul and for Jesus.)

“I thank my God every time I remember you. (slide) ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, (slide) ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (slide) ⁷It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; (slide) for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. (slide) ⁸God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.(slide)

In the long story I have just told, I have introduced you to the people and the book of Philippians.

I have drawn most of the details of the story from Acts 16 and from the book of Philippians itself.

I have introduced the book in this way because I want us to think of this book as the **letter** it is and a letter to real people in a real place.

I want us to grasp something of the feeling, the emotion, of these words penned by a man who loved these people dearly and read by people who loved him equally.

Paul was their missionary, and they were his supporting church.

Now I know that the church in Antioch was the sending church but given the strong relationship between Paul and the believers in Philippi, Paul was every bit their missionary too.

And as I read these words I couldn’t help but think of our relationship with our own missionaries – the Newcombs, Haleys, Loseys, Coles, Sprengers, Engels, Guderians, Thompsons, Nelsons, Hashes, Halas, and others.

In Philippians, their missionary, Paul, is writing home to them.
And what does he do in his opening remarks?

He encourages them.

And in his encouragement of them I am both
encouraged and challenged.

Let me show you what both encouraged and challenged me.

Paul writes that when he thinks of and prays for the Philippians it is
with joy that he does so.

Why?

Philippians 1:5 “Because of your partnership in the
gospel from the first day until now...”

Continuing on the same theme, in verse 7 he
says it this way:

Philippians 1:7 “All of you share in God's
grace with me.”

Paul thought about his relationship with the Philippian Christians and
said, “I am filled with joy because I know that even though we are
separated by many miles, **we are in this together**.”

We are true partners in the gospel. You share with me in God's
grace, the work that God is doing, there in Philippi and here in
this prison.”

Here was a group of people who truly “owned” God's purposes in the
world.

Yes, they had jobs and families.

Yes, they had tough times; they faced opposition to their faith
that resulted even in loss of employment and family support.

But they had been captured by God's grace and God's
purpose in the world and they had given themselves to it.

They believed Jesus when he said in Matthew 6:33, “Seek first
his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things
(material resources) will be given to you as well.”

Yes, they had to attend to their jobs, they had to make plans for
the future, and they had to respond to their civic and family
duties but more important than all of that was their calling from

God: 2 Corinthians 5:20 “We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”

Their careers, their education, homes, and hobbies, were second to their role in God's kingdom work.

Evangelism and missions weren't somebody else's job; they were theirs!

They didn't forget about Paul when he was away and he didn't forget about them – not so much from their personal relationship but because of their common cause – the advancement of the kingdom of God.

What about us?

Have secondary things taken first place in our lives?

Or is the advancement of the kingdom of God still our highest priority?

Would Paul, or more importantly God, speak with joy about our “participation in the gospel”?

And how did the Philippians express this “participation” in the gospel?

What did they do that made Paul feel this way about them?

There are three things I want to show you that they did.

First of all they gave to meet Paul's needs

2:25 “But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs.

4:15-16 “Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need.

4:18b “I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent.

Their attitude toward giving to meet the needs of missionaries and others is demonstrated in Paul's words about them when he wrote to the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 8:2-4 "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints."

I did not plan it but it is providential that this text from Philippians is being preached on the last day of our Kingdom Connection emphasis.

Jesus said it very bluntly that where we invest our money is where our hearts are.

Are our missionaries an extension of our hearts and hands?

Does our financial investment in them demonstrate it?

Secondly, the Philippians expressed their "participation in the gospel" by their own lives and witness.

Paul said it this way, Philippians 1:5 "your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."

Their great interest in the gospel and their partnership with Paul was **not only** expressed in their material support of Paul.

Paul says how they responded to the gospel themselves when they first heard, how they live their lives now, and how they witness to Christ where they are, is also their partnership in the gospel.

From the first day forward, these Christians actively responded to God and witnessed to the good news of Jesus.

Later in the letter Paul will speak directly to them about remaining faithful to the Lord: Philippians 1:27 "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel."

Some of the greatest encouragements in my kingdom work are those people who I invested in 20 and 30 years ago who are faithfully following Jesus today and are investing in the kingdom where they are.

Paul would be greatly disappointed and discouraged if while he was trying to reach others, the ones who responded earlier, fell away.

Your participation in the gospel from the first day until now is first of all about your own relationship with God.

And Paul is grateful because they are faithful.

But when Paul says “from the first day until now” he is talking also about another aspect of their “participation” in the gospel.

It wouldn't be much of a **partnership** if only one person was doing all the thinking, praying and working.

Paul knew **they had their shoulders to the wheel** as well as him.

He knew that **they were faithful in the face of opposition** just as he was (Philippians 1:30 “you are going through the same struggle you saw I had...”)

Paul knew that while he was in other parts of the world working to advance the kingdom, **they were at home doing the same.**

Nothing would be more discouraging to our missionaries than to hear that we had abandoned the mission.

How very discouraging to think that they are alone in such a difficult task.

How encouraging to know that the people back home are engaged as energetically in the work as you are.

To know that we are not only supporting them financially, but that we likewise think the same work they are doing is worthy of **our** time and energy can be the greatest encouragement.

Our missionaries have every reason to expect that we will be as invested in the kingdom of God as they are.

Do our everyday lives of following Jesus and our everyday lives of investment in the kingdom express our participation in the gospel?

The third way they expressed participation in the gospel is through their prayers for Paul.

It is outside of our immediate text, but listen to Paul's testimony: Philippians 1:19 "Through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance."

We must always be on guard that we don't rationalize our prayerlessness with bad theology.

There is no writer in the NT that is more convinced of predestination, divine providence and sovereignty than the Apostle Paul.

If anyone were going to be a determinist and claim there was no point in praying, it would be Paul.

And yet, there is no NT writer more insistent on prayer as God's appointed means to accomplish God's purposes than the Apostle Paul.

And he commends the Philippian Christians by saying that their prayers are what the Holy Spirit used to provide just what Paul needed.

I heard this past week of a state governor who was in Iraq to make certain that the troops from his reserve units were getting the kind of support they needed to do the job they were sent to do.

It's very blunt, but I'll ask it: If our front-line missionary troops were dependent on you and me, would they be getting the prayer support they need?

Paul writes that the Philippian Christians were doing everything they could materially to support their kingdom work through Paul.

They were not just expecting Paul to do it, but they were also engaged in the same kingdom work at home.

They were faithful to God's appointed means of making Paul's efforts bear fruit – they were praying.
 And they "owned" the mission of advancing the kingdom of God as much as Paul did.

What more could a missionary want?
 No wonder Paul is encouraged.
 No wonder he commends them.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have been given the same calling and high privilege.
 We are engaged in the same worldwide evangelization task as those Philippians.
 And we have the same promise that was given to them – that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."
 Our efforts are not in vain.

I am often amazed that God has given us the privilege of being involved in his kingdom work literally around the world.
 Can you believe it – this church is an international enterprise!
 We have missionaries and kingdom work in Africa, Europe, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Japan, Latin America, and the South Pacific.

As I already said, we are part of an international enterprise that cannot fail because God won't let it fail. (1:6).
 We are part of something that will continue to expand until the day Jesus comes again.

Worldwide evangelization is not only our missionaries' issue – **it is our issue!**
 We must give to it, we must live it and we must pray for it.

Let me close by asking you to join me in responding to the question:
 Am I an active faithful partner in the gospel?

Kingdom Connection cards – Maybe this is one of the ways God wants you to respond.