

Centred on the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. And please do keep open that passage in front of you. That's, as I said, we're going to be anchoring all our time together here. Once again, let me just say sincerely a thank you, not just from me, but from the whole congregation at Montrose, knowing that you have been praying for us and for the work that is going on there. We began, I began there at the beginning of last month, the beginning of July, and it's been a really encouraging time so far. One of the things that really pushed us over the edge to decide to go to Montrose is because we just saw that there was a real lack of strong gospel preaching, Bible teaching congregations, not just in Montrose, but in the entirety of Angus. And so our great desire is we really want to see a strong, healthy church established, not just in Montrose, but our hope is over the next few decades, we would love to see other congregations revitalized or started in some of the other towns around Angus. But what we want to do and the way to start that best and the way to establish a healthy church is where we started as we went straight to the Gospel of John in our first Sunday and we started preaching through that. Because what we wanted to establish first and foremost is that central to our faith, as Christians, is Jesus. Core to the health of a Christian is having Jesus as the foundation for us. And so that's where we've started. We've been working through that. And actually, we as a church are going to be beginning Philippians in a couple of weeks. So I've got a head on this so I could preach it for you guys because I know you've already gone through John and Joe's done a better job than what I would do for you. But we're going to be looking at Philippians together because what Philippians does for us, where John says the health of a Christian is having Jesus right at the center of their lives and their faith. What Philippians does for us is help us to see that the Gospel of Jesus is vital for the health of a local church.

For a church to be healthy, for a church to function, for its members to love one another, for it to carry out its mission that God has given us, the Gospel must shape all that it does.

The church must be centered and founded upon the Gospel of grace. That good news that Jesus, sent by God, gave his life for his people, rose from the dead and is now ascended and ruling and reigning in love over his people and will return to make all things new. That is central for the church.

And that's what Paul is doing here, writing to this church in Philippi. So Philippi, a town in the old Roman Empire. Here, what Paul is doing, it might be helpful actually for us to think of it in these terms. Paul is actually kind of, it's like he's writing a prayer letter to this congregation. Some of you will know there's old prayer letters that you would have got from missionaries that congregations would have supported historically. Maybe you still get those. Some of you might be signed up for them.

You might support people who are doing work all across the world. And every so often they'll send a letter to those who financially support them. And that's what Paul is doing here. He is writing to a church who is financially supporting him while he is in prison. And what Paul writes back to them is talking about how important the gospel is for the church. And so today, as we look at this passage, and there's lots in this passage, we're looking through a bigger section that we might, what we might do normally. So there'll be some bits that we don't cover in depth. Please come and ask me afterwards if you've got any questions. There's three big points that I'd love for us to take away this evening. If you're a note maker, these are the points for you. What Paul really wants to emphasize for this church is gospel partnership, gospel proclamation, and gospel priorities. Gospel partnership, gospel proclamation, and gospel priorities. And so first we're going to look here then at gospel partnership, looking at verses 3 to 11. Some of you might have heard this phrase before. If you want to humble a Christian, ask them about their prayer life. I don't know if anyone has ever done that to you.

[4 : 52] It really can take you down a notch and leave you in a place of guilt for a while. What I would like to say instead is this. You might want to humble a Christian by asking them about their prayer life, but if you want to encourage them, tell them how you're praying for them.

Tell them how you are praying for them. Recently I've been reading this book. It's the letters of a guy called Jack Miller. He is the most influential Presbyterian of the last century that you've never heard of. He served in a church just outside of Philadelphia. I've been reading through his letters and what's really struck me is he writes his letters of real profound insights to those who he is in partnership, not just locally, but across the globe. But the prayers are always birthed in and shaped by deliberate, diligent, and deep prayer for those individuals. Praying for them, lifting them up to God, bringing their name before the throne of grace. And so what's happening here then? And those prayers, those letters are so encouraging and that's what Paul is doing here first. I don't know if any of you have ever heard teaching maybe on this passage or other prayers of Paul throughout the letters.

And so often you walk away and you, the question that goes through your head may be ushered by the preachers. Are you praying like Paul like this? But that's not what the Philippians were thinking here as they heard this. Because what Paul is trying to do is he's trying to encourage these Christians. Here is a church that is healthy, but Paul knows that there are some things that are starting to cause cracks and friction amongst them. And so what he's trying to do is trying to encourage them in the gospel of Jesus. And so what he does here is he talks to them about how his prayers are shaped around what he's encouraging them in. And there's two things in particular I'd love you to see here. Firstly, it's this. He wants to, his prayers of thanksgiving, you can see there verse four, in all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy. And here we see the consistent partnership because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. You see, what Paul is saying is, from the moment I first came to Philippi, from that first time when Lydia heard the gospel, encountered Jesus through the word, from that moment where she put up Paul in her home, providing for him. Ever since then, the partnership between the church in Philippi and Paul has been strong and steady and consistent. The word here for partnership, what it means at its most basic level is kind of like a, think of this in terms of, it's like a business partnership. It's always talking here about a financial investment in another. And what Paul is saying is that these Christians here, in Philippi, have invested themselves in him. From the very beginning, even until now, even while Paul was in prison consistently, they have provided for him. Here, Paul is writing to them because a man named

Epaphroditus, we'll think a little bit about him next week. He has brought a gift from the church in Philippi to him while he's in prison. Prisons, when Paul was there, are very different to what they're like now. Now, there's many rights and laws which protect prisoners which weren't there at that time. For someone to survive in prison, they must be protected and provided for by someone outside. And here, we learn that this church in Philippi, it sends one of their own miles and miles and miles away to provide for him. And here, we see this consistent partnership. And this brings joy for Paul. And it's not just this consistent partnership, but it's their unashamed partnership with him. Have a look at verse 7. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart. And whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. That word there, share, is the same as that word there for partnership, back in verse 5. Paul is in prison. And it's very easy at this moment to say, actually, we don't really want to associate ourselves with him anymore. In a culture where Paul was writing to, shame and honour are so important. And being associated, being partnered with someone in jail means that their reputation now stains yours. And what Paul is saying is, you haven't abandoned me.

Actually, you still say that you are partners with me. It'd be like, imagine if Joe started preaching some controversial things here. And ended up being brought to jail. Now, that would be a moment of, not just crisis for Joe and his family, but also a moment where people in this congregation would have to step up and say, do they partner with him or not? When people ask you in the street, so do you go to that church where the pastor went to jail because of the things he's been saying? And the church in Philippi, don't just say, yes, we are partnered with Paul, but we will give him and invest in him.

[10 : 44] And we are unashamed of our partnership with him. And Paul is saying, I know that you are the real deal then. You see that there in verse 6, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry us on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Here Paul sees by the way that they show their partnership with him, that they are the real deal. They are the real McCoy.

They are true Christians who will persevere until the day of Christ. They are partnering with Paul. And actually, here's something, and this might sound a bit strange, but follow through here with me. The invitation for us here and the encouragement we can have is if we are also those who partner with Paul. Now you think, how are we meant to financially give to Paul? He's long gone. But the idea is that we partner with Paul in the gospel that he proclaims.

We stay true to him. We stay true to all those who proclaim this gospel, who stake their lives in this gospel. What this means is when we come up to the harder parts of Paul's teaching.

When we come up to the center of the gospel, the message of grace that people are saved by faith alone in Christ alone. We do not dodge away with that, but we stay with Paul.

And his encouragement to all who partner with those true gospel workers is that he knows that we will persevere when Christ comes. And so what he's saying here then is what draws them together is their shared investment in the gospel. One of the wonderful things about going to a church is you end up meeting other people who have shared interests with you, don't you? It's where you build up new friendships.

[12 : 48] It's that classic line of C.S. Lewis, friendship always begins with what? You too. But so often in church we forget that our primary unity with one another is based not around interests, but around the gospel of Jesus.

So it's not a fellowship of those who prefer the Scottish Psalter over the Sing Psalms. It's not a fellowship of all those who grew up going to free church youth camps and those who didn't.

It's a fellowship of those who have encountered Jesus through his words, indwelt by the Spirit, brought together through the cross of Christ, saying, we are together, we are in partnership.

You see, this is something for us to remember. As it seems the church grows smaller and smaller across Scotland, here's a reminder. The church isn't big enough for small little cliques.

But actually, let's put it in a positive way. The gospel's too big for small little cliques in the church. The gospel brings together the most unlikely people, bringing joy and unity.

[14 : 06] And look at the way that Paul is here. Look at the way he expresses his unity and his encouragement and his delight in those he is partnered with.

One commentator says this, Paul's thanksgiving in his letter is distinguished by emphatic repetitions and emotional intensity. And have a look at the language, just even in that first couple of verses, three and four.

I thank God every time I remember you, in all my prayers, for all of you, I always pray with joy. Or even look at the way he says, how I yearn for you.

And so Paul here is seeking to encourage them, and he tells them about what his prayer is for them. I'd love to spend more time here, but let me just say a couple of things that we can learn from this prayer about what his deep desire is for them.

His great concern for them is that they would persevere in faithfulness and fruitfulness. Have a look there. He says, your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth and insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

[15 : 15] Paul's great concern for them is that they would stay true to the gospel, and then verse 11, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.

So not only would they be faithful, but they would be fruitful. They would see lives transformed, lives shown by love and care, grace and mercy towards one another.

And so what Paul is trying to encourage them here with gospel partnership. And then we start to shift into what he's wanting to do with the rest of this letter, where he's talking about the gospel being at the center of all that they do.

And this is what we see here when we talk about this gospel proclamation. Here we're looking at verses 12 to 18. And one of the pieces of advice that I got a few times when I was training for ministry, working at the congregation in St. Andrews, the minister there said to me a couple of times, is this, Ciaran, keep the main thing, the main thing.

That's not keep the main thing, the only thing, but it's keep the main thing, the main thing. And the main thing is the gospel of Jesus. George Whitefield, he was a missionary for the Church of England back in the 18th century, possibly one of the most famous men in the colonies at that stage in America.

[16 : 40] And there's a story about one time, just before he was about to travel to America by boat, he was down in the south of England. And a couple of days before he was to leave, he walked up into his apartment, walked up into the apartment in the inn that he was staying in, and there were two men inside there who beat him, beat him badly.

It was only the fact that the woman who owned the inn and her daughter ran in and chased them off that he survived. What did he do? The next day, he kept the main thing the main thing, and he went out to his preaching engagement.

And actually, more people than were originally intended came to hear the gospel. Paul's concern is the main thing is the main thing. And actually, God will use the most unlikely of circumstances to get that out.

So George Whitefield, being beaten by these men, caused many more people to hear the gospel than would first have happened. And that's what Paul is saying here. Paul is writing to this church who are concerned that someone they love and care for is in prison.

And look at what he says there in verse 12. Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.

[18 : 01] Keep the main thing God uses unlikely circumstances and situations to further the gospel. And this happens in two ways.

Firstly, we see it here, those who are in prison with Paul, they find out why he's there. It's that question, is what are you doing here?

And his first thing is, well, I'm here for someone else, actually. Some people might be thinking, oh, is he saying he's framed? That's something that we hear so regularly, isn't it? He's saying, no, I'm here because of Jesus.

This man who has transformed my life. I'm here because I've been proclaiming him wherever I go, and now I've been brought into prison. And you can see that there, verse 13, as a result, it's become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

And there's a story, and this might sound strange to you, the story of what Paul is saying here, that people are coming to hear about Jesus because of his imprisonment. I was reading recently about this group who were in Carthage, in North Africa, in the second century, a group of Christians.

[19 : 20] They were brought to prison, and they were going to be brought to the amphitheater in that area for the gladiators. They were going to be the sacrificial lambs, shall we put it.

And in the days leading up to that, one of the prison guards, a man called Pudens, got to know them. He saw these people whose lives were so different to anything he had ever encountered before.

Instead of worrying about their future, he re-encountered these people who were soon to die, rejoicing that they suffered for Jesus' name.

Pudens was so fascinated by these people. He said, I want to know why it is that you do not care about what is going to happen to you. He ultimately became a Christian, hearing about the good news of Jesus.

And this is what Paul is saying here. It doesn't matter what has happened as long as Jesus is known and proclaimed. And that's the second thing that we see here, is that what has happened to Paul emboldens others to go and preach the gospel.

[20 : 36] Verse 14, And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. Now this is an interesting bit here because he says there are two camps who are now going out and preaching more about Jesus because of his imprisonment.

There are those who are pro-Paul and those who are anti-Paul. Those who are pro-Paul do it out of goodwill. They do it out of love for him and knowing the reason that Paul was there.

They are those who do it out of true motives. These are the language that he uses in the following verses. But those who are anti-Paul, they do it out of envy and rivalry.

They do it out of selfish ambition and seeking to stir up trouble for him. They do it out of false motives. Now, we don't know exactly what these false motives are that cause them to stir up trouble for Paul.

But it doesn't matter. That's not what Paul wants us to be concerned about. Because have a look at verse 18. He says this, verse 17, it's helpful I suppose to read this, the former preach Christ out of selfish ambition not sincerely supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am changed.

[21 : 56] But what does it matter? What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.

And because of this, I rejoice. Keep the main thing the main thing. Paul is saying here, yeah, I get it. It's personal.

But I'm not taking it personally. Because his concern is much greater than himself. His sole concern is to know that Christ and the gospel is being proclaimed clearly throughout the globe.

I suppose for us this is helpful as we see this, as we see how Paul keeps the main thing the main thing. When we're looking for a new church or we're talking to people who are coming in, maybe this is your first time, this is my first time as well, hopefully you're feeling welcome this evening.

But when you're looking for a church, what are the key questions that you're asking about this? When you attend it, are you thinking to yourself, is the service not like how you would want it to be?

[23 : 19] Maybe they didn't sing enough modern songs or maybe they didn't sing enough old songs? Is the preacher a little bit different to how your old preacher is or your favourite preacher online is?

What are the questions that we're asking? I think what Paul wants to help the church to remember, what he's encouraging him to say is this, is the gospel being preached there?

Is the name of Christ being lifted up? Is he central to all that this church does? And Paul isn't just not fussed, Paul rejoices when Jesus is proclaimed, when the gospel is front and centre, when the gospel is the foundation and the core of a local church.

And so, let's rejoice with him, knowing that Christ has been proclaimed all across this city today. What a wonderful thing to know that this isn't the only place where Jesus is being proclaimed.

I know sometimes it's hard and as lots of new people are going to be coming into the city over the next month, lots of new students, you'll be thinking, wouldn't it be great if they found their home here?

[24 : 42] But why don't we instead adopt Paul's attitude and think, wouldn't it be great if lots of these students found a church where Jesus is proclaimed clearly?

That's our concern. It's not that they'll find the true denomination. It's not that they'll find the perfect church, but they'll find a place where the perfect one is proclaimed week in, week out, where they can find liberty in the name of Jesus, where they can see the good news that the resurrection of Jesus has given new life.

That is what Paul rejoices in, and here is the invitation to rejoice with him as well, to rejoice with him as well as we take on his gospel priorities.

That's our final point this evening, and we don't have long, so we won't spend as much time in this point. But our final point here, we see this in the second half of verse 18 through to the end of verse 26, is we see here Paul's gospel priorities and how they shape his life and how he invites us to let them shape our lives and our decisions and our concerns as well.

Here is a little bit of a fast forward to next week. Have a look with me at chapter 2, verse 3. Chapter 2, verse 3, here Paul says to the church in Philippi, do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.

[26 : 14] Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves.

what we see here in the final parts of our passage this evening is Paul is giving us kind of a fleshed out version of what this looks like to value others above yourselves, because our great concern is helping others to know Jesus in the gospel, to know Christ, to be strengthened in Christ, to be comforted in him, and to persevere in him until the day of Christ, when he returns in glory to judge the living and the dead, and to bring his children home.

And so what Paul talks about here is his great priority, his great priority is that Jesus would be honored in his life.

Have a look with me at verse 20. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now, as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

And that language there, exalted, it can, I think, literally it means to be enlarged, to be big up, to be made mega. You might also translate it as to be magnified.

[27 : 46] What Paul is saying is that his life is like a magnifying glass. Whether in life or death, when people look at him, all he wants them to see is a life poured out for Jesus.

Because he knows that Jesus is our only hope in life and in death. And so what Paul is saying here is, remember, Paul here is in prison.

He's not exactly in a five-star hotel. He's not on his annual leave. Here Paul is locked up for the name of Jesus. And so Paul is saying here, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

He's thinking about what are his future options? What does life look like for him? And honestly, he seems to think there are only two options.

It's death or it's going back to be with the Philippians. And he's thinking to himself, which one is better? Have a look at what he says there.

[28 : 53] He talks about how being with Jesus would be better by far. That's in verse 23. I'm torn between the two. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.

You see, Paul is so convinced that the center of the Christian faith is all about Jesus. Jesus. So hear me out when I say this. You see, the Christian faith is not about justification.

It's not about sanctification. It's not about glorification. It's not about any of these shun words apart from Christ. The great reward is him.

the great reward is not just to know him, but to be with him. That is the golden treasure that awaits all those who have put their trust in Jesus, is to be with him in glory, no longer stained by sin, no longer marked by the scars of this world, but to be with our Lord and Savior, to see him face to face.

And this is what Paul is saying. That is greater than anything this world can offer. But look at his priorities here. Look at his priorities. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

[30 : 28] For Paul to remain with them, this means that he will have to travel all the way back to Philippi. After, we don't know how long, months in jail, in a place where he wouldn't have been treated well, after being beaten numerous times, having to make the long journey to Philippi, days and days of travel.

Also to put himself in the firing line again. Once more to put his body on the line for preaching Christ, and he says, I know that I need to be with you.

Because my main concern is not about my own benefits, it's not about what suits me, but it's what will benefit others. I'm a big fan of the West Wing, and I really have to control myself not to use too many illustrations from it in sermons.

But there's one bit in it, and it's really cheesy, but it gets you going. There's a moment where the staff team of the President of the United States are gathered together, and they're talking about their future, and one stands up and says, I serve at the pleasure of the President, and another one stands up, I serve at the pleasure of the President, and another one stands up, I serve at the pleasure of the President, and all of them goes around, and each of them says it.

Now it's slightly corny in that particular kind of American way, but actually it's a wonderful picture of saying, my main concern is to do what his desire is.

[32 : 01] And Paul's main concern is to work for the glory and honour of Jesus, and for the goods of his people. What Paul is showing us here in flesh is the priorities that we are called to have, gospel priorities, which says we want to seek the goods and the blessing and the flourishing of us as they know Jesus, as they persevere in him.

And so this is what Paul wants us to do as we finish our time together, to keep the main thing the main thing, in our partnership with one another, in what is proclaimed in our churches, and what our priorities are together as his people, living for his glory in this city and all across the world.

Let's pray together. God, our Father, we praise you and we glorify you, we magnify and exalt your name.

We thank you for the gift of your son Jesus, the one given in love, the one who gave his life so that we might have life, the one who bore our shame, the one who bore the wrath of God so that we might be restored into relationship with you.

we pray, Heavenly Father, help us as your church to place the gospel right at the center of our life together as we think about how we might serve your people here in Aberdeen, down in Montrose, and all across this nation, and we rejoice.

[33 : 57] We rejoice that Jesus has been proclaimed all throughout this nation on this day, and our prayer is raise up more workers, raise up more people who will proclaim Jesus throughout this country, to the glory of your name, and we pray this in Christ.

Amen.