

# Philippians 1:1-11

## Knowing the Joy of Gospel Fellowship

*...making request with joy for your fellowship in the gospel – vv. 4,5*

How does a Christian who's been put in jail encourage himself? We hope we don't ever have to answer that question by our experience and yet we know that even this very day there are Christians that are in jail for their faith – how do they encourage themselves? Paul sheds light on that subject for us for Paul was in jail at the time he wrote this epistle to the Philippians. How did Paul encourage himself?

We know that he did encourage himself. Indeed we know from these verses that the joy of the Lord was his portion even while he was in jail. This opening paragraph in chp. 1 shows us that Paul's time in prayer went a long way toward contributing to his joy. *I thank my God upon every remembrance of you*, he writes in v. 3. Doesn't that statement indicate to us that Paul took heart by remembering those at Philippi who had gained a saving interest in Christ? They were precious to him because they were precious to Christ. They had much in common with the apostle because they, like him, had experienced the life transforming power of the gospel. And so the very thought of them brought joy to his heart.

But not only did Paul find occasion for thanksgiving by his remembrance of the saints at Philippi but he also took a prayer request to God from his jail cell. Look at what it says in vv. 4,5 *Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, 5 For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.*

Paul's request was for his fellowship in the gospel with the saints at Philippi continue as it had continued from the first day of their conversion to the present hour. They obviously weren't present with him in his prison cell but he knew that they were with him in spirit and that they stood with him in the defense and confirmation of the gospel (v. 7). And would you note that this prayer request that accompanied Paul's thanksgiving was a request that was made with joy. This is why I say that the very thought of his fellowship in the gospel with the saints at Philippi brought joy to Paul's heart even while he sat unjustly in a Roman prison.

He undoubtedly reflected on the times of fellowship he had enjoyed at Philippi and he undoubtedly looked forward to what would be renewed fellowship with them again for he expresses his confidence further down in v. 25 that he would continue in this world and he would have occasion to enjoy fellowship with them again.

Look at vv. 25,26 *And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith; 26 That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again.* This is an interesting statement made by Paul especially when you consider that continuing with the Philippians was not Paul's first choice. To depart and be with Christ was far better in Paul's view (v.

23) but to remain was more needful for them at the time so Paul was content to remain and his heart was filled with joy at the prospects of being with them again.

It's hard to read Paul without seeing what an optimist he was. As far as he was concerned he was in a win/win situation. To depart and go to be with Christ – that was a winning situation but to stay and be with the Christ's people on earth – that was a winning situation as well. Oh that such a perspective would govern the hearts of all of Christ's followers.

You and I are in that same situation as believers in Christ. You should learn, if you haven't already to anticipate with joy Christ's welcoming words to his people: *Well done good and faithful servant...enter thou into the joy of thy Lord* (Mt. 25:23). On the other hand you should also learn that so long as you remain at your station in this world that the fellowship of God's people also brings you cause for joy and thanksgiving.

You might not think so when you think of your own personal struggles and when the devil endeavors to magnify the shortfalls of other Christians in your mind but all that means is that you need victory over the flesh and the devil so you can see and appreciate the value of your fellowship in the gospel with those of like precious faith.

And so this is what I want to focus on this morning – this theme of gospel fellowship: *making request with joy, 5 For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now* Paul writes in vv. 4,5.

## How Can We Know the Joy of Gospel Fellowship?

### I. We Must Know the Nature of Gospel Fellowship

There are various kinds of fellowship in the world, you see. Where ever you find any kind of bond between a people you have some kind of fellowship. It might be a social fellowship or a civic fellowship as people become members of a civic club or a community action project. How often are you exposed to groups of people coming together to go on a designated walk in order to raise funds for certain kinds of cancer – that's a kind of fellowship.

Men and women in the military form close bonds of fellowship. Those bonds run deep because of the trust and mutual support that's required with lives on the line. We know as well that there's a certain fellowship found in family relationships – love and loyalty becomes strong, or it should run strong, between family members. This is true under the realm of common grace even among unsaved people. It's a mark of judgment on a nation when the bonds between family members breaks down.

So there are various kinds of fellowship but the thing to note in our text is that Paul has a very specific and very precious kind of fellowship in mind when he makes reference to the Philippians *fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now*. Paul is speaking of a bond between people that is grounded in the gospel. This specific form of fellowship is labeled by Paul himself as fellowship in the gospel or gospel fellowship. I dare say that there's a

sense in which this bond of gospel fellowship runs deeper and becomes stronger than any other bond of fellowship under the sun. Christ certainly sees it that way.

Listen to the words of Christ from Mt. 12:46-50 *While he yet talked to the people, behold, his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him. 47 Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. 48 But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? 49 And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! 50 For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.*

Do you see how Christ draws from the strongest bond of fellowship in the world – the family bond – and he makes the spiritual application of that bond to the bond between his disciples with him. And I don't think we're abusing the application by saying that it also applies to the bonds between Christ's followers with one another.

Gospel fellowship, then, is grounded in a common love for Christ and springs from a common belief in Christ's love for his people. Listen to the way Paul describes this fellowship when he writes to the Corinthians in 1Cor. 1:9 *God [is] faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.* You see from this statement how Christian fellowship is grounded in our fellowship with Christ? You see also from this verse that the kind of fellowship Paul has in view is that to which the followers of Christ have been effectually called – *ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son.*

As Christians we share a common calling to a Savior that we have in common to the blessings of salvation that we also have in common. This commonality is shown to us in the opening verses of this epistle to the Philippians. Look again at how this epistle begins: *Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: 2 Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.*

I pointed out in our first study that the word of God comes to all the saints – not just to the bishops and deacons but to all the saints including the bishops and deacons. So you could say that gospel fellowship is grounded in God's word. We all have that word in common. This is one of the reasons that we are zealous for the defense of the inspiration of scripture. An attack on the truth of scripture is an attack on the very thing that forms the bond between Christ and his followers and Christ's followers to each other.

I would go a step further now and suggest to you also that the grace and peace referenced in v. 2 is given to all the saints not just to the more spiritually minded ones or not just to the ones that hold office but to all the saints grace flows from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ and because grace flows to us all we all share the common experience of being at peace with God.

So the fellowship of the gospel is rightly named by Paul because our gospel is the gospel of Jesus Christ and we are bound to Jesus Christ. We believe in him – we believe in his

love for us – we believe in his atoning death and his resurrection from the grave. There is, you could say, a doctrinal foundation for our fellowship. And in this respect I like the statement that pertains to the church found in Ac 2:42 where, speaking of those souls that were saved on the Day of Pentecost, it says: *And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*

So the fellowship Paul is referencing in our text is a spiritual fellowship – its a doctrinal fellowship – it's a deep and abiding fellowship. I would also add that it's a mysterious fellowship – mysterious in the sense that it's something the world can't comprehend. Listen to these words from Eph. 3 and see if they don't express something of the deepness and purpose of this fellowship. This is from Eph. 3:8-11:

*Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; 9 And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: 10 To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, 11 According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord:*

This passage is so rich and deserves a sermon of its own – what I would have you see from it now, however, is that this fellowship in the gospel manifested by the church puts God's wisdom on display before heaven and earth and that this fellowship is called a fellowship of the mystery. The world can't understand it because it's hidden in God. Unbelievers can't understand it because the only way spiritual mysteries are known are through the revelation of God's word.

One more point that I want to make on the nature of this fellowship and that is the corporate experience of this fellowship. One of my favorite verses that serves to demonstrate the experiential nature of our fellowship with Christ is found in 1Jn. 1:3 *That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship [is] with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.*

This verse shows that the Bible was never intended to be merely the record of the experience of historical characters of the Bible. John is referencing the experience of those early disciples when he says *That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you.* So he's declaring something he's seen and heard but he's declaring it not that others might be impressed with his experience of having seen and heard Christ but he's declaring these things rather so that you and I may enter into fellowship with what John has seen and heard and what this fellowship amounts to is a common bond of fellowship with the Father and with Jesus Christ.

This verse certainly shows that the purpose of Scripture and the purpose of declaring which is just another word for preaching – the purpose behind reading the Scripture and preaching the Scripture is that the people of God corporately enter into fellowship with God and with Christ.

I hope you're fellowshiping with God and Christ this morning – that's your purpose for being here. And I hope that your conscious that this is what your brothers and sisters in Christ are also experiencing. It is in this corporate experience of Christ that we enjoy the fellowship of the gospel.

It's no wonder, then, that Paul could make his prayer request with joy. Fellowship in the gospel is meant to be something that is joyful. You've heard me make reference often to the first question in our shorter catechism – What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glory God and to enjoy him forever. A good follow up question would be – how does man enjoy God? And a good answer would be – man enjoys God in the fellowship of the gospel.

So we see something of the nature of gospel fellowship. If you're going to enjoy gospel fellowship then it becomes important to have some idea of what gospel fellowship means. And now that you have some idea of what it means, we're ready to go on to consider that if we would know the joy of gospel fellowship.

## II. We Must Know How to Practice that Fellowship

It's one thing to know something about it but it's a different thing now to do it. And so the question to consider is – how do we do it?

Paul shows us how to do it and he shows us how to do it even while being isolated from other Christians while he's in prison. Notice again Paul's practice in v. 3 *I thank my God upon every remembrance of you*. There's a good place for gospel fellowship to begin. It begins with prayer and it begins with prayer for others and it begins with a prayer of thanksgiving for others.

I can't help but wonder at this point how challenging and convicting Paul's practice is to us. Is this something you find easy to do – to remember your brothers and sisters in Christ with thanksgiving? Or do you find it easier to remember your brothers and sisters in Christ with regard to their faults?

Remembering faults can very often spring from pride. And while you may not use the same words as the Pharisee who prayed in the temple next to the publican it's possible that you manifest his spirit and that your prayer in essence amounts to little more than *Lord, I thank thee that I am not like other men*. When I remember this brother's arrogance or that sister's rudeness or another couple's carelessness *I thank you Lord that I'm not like that*.

Are you sure you're not like that? How is it that you seem to be so keen on others faults that you've become blinded to the grace in their lives? The solution to the kind of pride that begins with remembering the faults of others is to regain that spirit of the publican who could not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven when he cried *God be merciful to me a sinner*.

Personal humility which leads to a greater and deeper appreciation for the grace of God to you will go a long way in enabling you to thank God upon every remembrance of others. So this is where the practice of gospel fellowship starts. You remember with

thanksgiving your brothers and sisters in Christ – knowing as you do that Christ died for them as he died for you and that the Holy Spirit has visited them as he has visited you and that your brothers and sisters in Christ have come to see themselves as unworthy sinners the same way you've come to see yourself.

In close connection with thanksgiving Paul also demonstrates that gospel fellowship is something that is sought in prayer. What exactly is he praying for in v. 4? We see him making reference to a very specific request – *making request with joy for your fellowship in the gospel.*

I don't know how much you think about this – I have to admit that before this study I wouldn't be able to admit that this is something I've thought about enough – but when you prepare to come to church what do you think about? You probably think about your desire to meet with Christ. And that's a good thing to think about. We do, after all, desire to meet with Christ and learn of Christ and hear from Christ. But could I suggest also, based on Paul's example in our text, that you think about meeting with other Christians when you come to church.

Your prayer could be as simple as saying – *Lord make me a blessing to others. Help me, Lord, to be a source of encouragement to others. Lord, I have drawn encouragement from others and I want now to be a source of encouragement to those that have encouraged me. May I be sensitive, Lord, to the burdens and needs that others are carrying. May I bear those burdens with them and may I Lord, be humble enough to admit to others that I bear burdens that I want them to bear with me.*

This whole matter of thanking God for others and praying for others is encapsulated by Paul when he says in v. 7 *Even as it is meet for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart.* There's gospel fellowship in a nutshell – having you in my heart. There's another expression of this given to us in the very next verse – v. 8 *For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ.* Another English version puts it this way: *For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.*

And what this verse teaches us, then, is that there is Christ-likeness to Christians taking each other to heart and thanking God for each other and yearning with Christ-like affection for each other. Don't you find it to be uplifting to think that Christ yearns for you, and Christ's affection is towards you and Christ desires communion with you. Here, then, is the way Christ's affection and Christ's yearning comes to you – it comes to you through others, through those of like precious faith. And it makes its way to others through you.

So what, then, does this look like? I've described it from this portion of Philippians in subjective terms. What does it really look like when it's put in practice? It looks like this – God's people coming together to worship Christ – God's people raising their voices together to praise Christ conscious of the fact that they are engaged in corporate worship.

And then it looks like God's people visiting with each other after they've worshipped Christ. It looks like the preacher standing at the door to greet people as they leave but

hardly anybody comes his way because they are all visiting each other, sharing with each other victories and challenges and testimonies to the Lord's faithfulness. And it looks like the people of God united to a common cause – the cause of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It would be a mistake to think that the practice of gospel fellowship begins when people come to church and ends when they leave church.

No, the practice of gospel fellowship continues with Christians taking each other to heart in the course of the week – doing what we can to meet each other's spiritual needs and physical needs and financial needs. Listen to the words of Paul as he makes reference to an offering in the church at Corinth. This is found in 2Cor. 8:3-5:

*For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; 4 Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. 5 And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.*

I trust you can see, then, what gospel fellowship looks like and how it's practiced. It takes on many appearances but those appearances spring from hearts that are in tune with Christ and in tune, therefore, with Christ's people.

I wonder, then, this morning – are you practicing gospel fellowship? If you're truly enjoying the blessings of salvation and your heart is ruled by the peace of God that passes understanding and you draw your strength from the joy of your salvation then all that I'm describing will come quite naturally for you. You won't regard anything I've said pertaining to gospel fellowship as an insurmountable challenge – you'll see it rather as something that you have done and desire to do.

Before closing let me point out that there is always room for improvement when it comes to gospel fellowship. Look at how Paul's prayer is expressed in v. 9 *And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.*

Every indication was that their love was already abounding but Paul's prayer for them was that it would continue to abound more and more. Let's not ever make the mistake of thinking that we've arrived when it comes to the matter of gospel fellowship. There is always room for improvement. Indeed, I can't help but think that often times the need is for our hearts to be enlarged with a greater capacity to take in more of Christ's love. His love defies comprehension but this much we can say for his love – that the more we know of it the more we'll long to manifest it. Gospel fellowship gives us that outlet.

May the Lord help us, then, to pursue with joy our fellowship in the gospel.