

September 20, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

In Every Way Christ is Proclaimed

Philippians 1: 6 – 20

The confident assurance of the gospel is this: *that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* Our beginning in the gospel is God-initiated and our living in the gospel is God-sustained and our ending in the gospel is God-completed. He *will* finish what He has begun. From start to finish, this is a work of grace. Apart from his sustaining grace, none of us is assured of final salvation. That is why the gospel is such good news. It is His grace that overcame all our rebellion and resistance and ignited faith in our hearts to believe in the first place.

Starting and ending in the gospel is the mark of real Christians. We receive the gospel, we stand in the gospel and we are saved by the gospel – and the proof of that is that we endure and remain in the gospel – that is we hold fast the gospel. **To hold fast the gospel means that we have appropriated the truth of the gospel in our lives** – that is we have made the gospel part of who we are. It means that we daily rehearse the gospel – we make the gospel central to our lives – we allow the truth of the gospel to dictate our plans and priorities – and we endure all the way to the end. In John 8:31 Jesus told those who said they believed in Him that there was one test of authentic discipleship: *'If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples'*. This is not some intellectual assent, but to abide means to *remain, stay, stand fast, dwell, continue, wait, last, endure, be permanent.* The New Testament, and indeed church history is filled with examples of those who did not eventually remain or abide or endure all the way, proving their confession of faith was never genuine.

The Scripture is full of warnings and encouragements that the reality of our faith is proved not just by good beginnings, but by good endings: *But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.* Hebrews 3:13 We need to know that we have really embraced the gospel of grace and experience its daily impact on our lives, from the moment of new birth until we go to be with the Lord, or He returns to gather His church at the end of the age. Is your faith genuine? That is has the gospel made a difference in the way you think, the way you do business? Has it made a difference in your relationships? Are you God-conscious? Is there a delight in the things of God and a yearning for holiness in your being? Is there a sense of glad submission to the sovereignty of God? Is it Christ who is your treasure? If the faith you say you have is real, there will be some tangible, measureable fruit of that faith. Paul was convinced that the Philippians had made a good beginning in Christ, not just because he had ministered among them previously, but because of some visible outward signs of their genuine faith. *It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.* Philippians 1:7

He says that he is convinced of their genuine faith for two reasons. **First, he prayed for them. Prayer sustains faith.** I think that is what he means when he says that he holds them in his heart. What this expresses I think is that deep bond of affection and love someone has for another that keeps that person or persons constantly in mind. And I think what that translates into is that Paul's holding the Philippians in his heart meant that he was constantly praying for them. He told them a few verses back that: *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy,* Philippians 1:3-4 Paul's confidence was not based on their performance but on God's ability. I believe that praying for one another is one of the means of grace not only to bring us to faith, but to keep us in the faith. Nothing endears a person more to you than to pray for them. Paul's testimony was this: *For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.* Philippians 1:8

And also I believe that wherever Paul ministered the gospel, he told the story of those Philippians – how there was this lady named Lydia, a God-seeker, that he met the first time through, and how a slave girl was miraculously delivered from demons, and how he and Silas got beaten and thrown in jail for the sake of the gospel, and as they were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, He caused an earthquake not only to get them out but to save a jailer and his family. I think because of their faithfulness to partner with him in the gospel, Paul held them in his heart and told the story at every opportunity.

The second reason that Paul was convinced of their genuine faith is because they were fellow-partakers of the grace of God in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. That is, the Philippians showed that they had indeed embraced the faith by the way they partnered with Paul in the gospel. In other words, **our faith is evidenced by our works.** He says as much in verse 5: *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.* And then in verse 7 he says: *for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.* **The Philippians got it.** As D.A. Carson puts it: *'[They] rolled up their sleeves and got involved in the advance of the gospel. They continued their witness in Philippi, they persevered in their prayers for Paul, they sent money to support him in his ministry.'* All of that testified to the fact that they had appropriated the gospel in their lives and it made a difference in how they lived.

When I was in Kenya a few weeks ago, I had a request from the pastors during our joint executive team meeting. Milton and the API evangelistic team are putting on a gospel crusade in the town of Amagoro this November 25 - 29th and they asked if we would partner with them in this venture through our prayers. They will be spending a week of prayer and fasting November 8 - 14th for the gospel and asked if Summit Christian Fellowship would join them in a week of prayer and fasting. Knowing your heart and soul for prayer, I answered yes for you. So beginning Sunday the 8th of November, we will be joining the pastors and churches in Kenya in a week of prayer and fasting for the proclamation of the word and the advance of the gospel there in Amagoro. I wanted to let you know early enough so you can begin preparing your hearts and minds and schedules to give this priority in your life.

The Philippians got it – **they put the gospel first** – they made it their priority, and my sincere hope and prayer is that we get it. The greatest need of any man, woman or child is to know Christ. It is not first of all that we have nice homes, good jobs, plenty to eat, fine clothes or good educations – it is not of first importance that we have our health, enjoy peace, live in comfort, or have enough money. **The thing of first importance is that Christ is proclaimed.** The only job Christ gave His followers is to go and make disciples. And as we have said before – there are only two ways to obey that command with regard to cross-cultural missions: **we are either goers or senders.** Apart from that there is only disobedience. **Those who go are sent and those who send go with the goers through their prayers and financial support.** That is what the Philippians did. In fact, they seem to be one of the only churches that did get it. Paul tells them in chapter 4: *And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only.* Philippians 4:15

Paul's passion was the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and at the center of his relationship with the Philippians was the gospel. Did you notice how everything he talks about relates to the gospel? He didn't spend any time talking about the good meals they shared while he was with them, or the latest gossip from Rome – his passion was the gospel and how that played out practically in their lives. **And our common bond is the gospel as well.** So he prays for them: *And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.* Philippians 1:9-11

The greatest fruit of the gospel in our lives is love – the love of God that has been shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. I believe that this is a love that is fiercely gospel-centered, because it was the love of God that compelled Him to send His Son to die for us that we might be brought to God. The outstanding characteristic of those whose lives have been irrevocably changed by the gospel is love. This is not merely some warm fuzzy feeling for others, but an enemy-loving, self-denying, sacrificial kind of love that is simply unexplainable by human standards.

Richard Wormbrand, a Romanian pastor who spent 14 years in Communist prison for the sake of the gospel said this about those who beat him, starved him, burned holes in his body: *'It was in prison that we found the hope of salvation for the Communists. It was there we developed a sense of responsibility toward them. It was in being tortured by them that we learned to love them.'* He says, *'I have seen Christians in Communist prison with fifty pounds of chains on their feet, tortured with red-hot iron pokers, in whose throats spoonfuls of salt had been forced, being kept afterward without water, starving, whipped, suffering from cold – and praying with fervor for the Communists. This is humanly inexplicable! This is the love of Christ which was poured out in our hearts.'*

This is a love that is full of knowledge and discernment. Dick Foth has said that **'Love is the accurate estimation and the adequate supply of another's need.'** And what men and women need at the bottom of it all is a real, living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot forget that. That has to burn in our being until the gospel takes center stage in our hearts and minds and we look beyond what our eyes can see and see the real need of lost people around us.

And Paul was praying for that love to increase and abound more and more: *so that you may approve what is excellent. He was praying, and we ought to pray, for gospel fruit.* I believe Paul did not want them to be content with a mediocre faith. A faith that just concerns itself with how I am doing. But a vibrant, living growing faith that pursues what is best in God, a faith that pushes the boundaries of the known to the unknown – a faith-filled walk that is not content with anything less than God Himself. I think he wanted them to plumb the depths of this gospel walk in joyful obedience to prove and approve the excellencies of the gospel in their lives. He was looking ahead to the goal: *and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.* He was praying that they would exhibit the fruit of righteousness that is the outflow of the gospel: *filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.* Because ultimately his prayer is that all of this would be *to the glory and praise of God.* In short, Paul was asking for gospel fruit in the lives of the Philippians, because the ultimate goal of our prayers is that our lives bring glory to the God who redeemed us. **That in every way Christ would be proclaimed.**

Whatever Paul's situation or circumstances, the burning question on his heart was: What about the gospel? For Paul, every circumstance was an opportunity for the gospel. So he encourages the Philippians with these words: *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.* Philippians 1:12-13 There might have been some rumors floating around about Paul. Some may have thought that it was his own fault that he got thrown into prison. Some may have thought that Paul's imprisonment was a setback for the Christian movement. Apparently there were those who thought that prison was a shame and didn't necessarily glorify God, so Paul sets them straight: **'Prison has actually advanced the purpose of God on the earth.'**

In fact, his story and the gospel had gone all throughout the whole Imperial guard. The full complement of Imperial guard was around nine thousand men. And I am not suggesting that he spoke to each one – but because he was chained to at least one soldier all the time, and these guards obviously had to be relieved at intervals by other guards – Paul always had a captive audience for the gospel. And I am sure that stories about this remarkable man got around the barracks and the palace as soldiers began coming to Christ as a result of their connection with him. So that eventually Paul could say without boasting - *it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.* They knew he wasn't a hardened criminal – he wasn't a rebel or a thief or a murderer. The most they could convict him of was being a Christian. I often wonder how many of us would be convicted of being a Christian if all they had to go on was the evidence of our lives? I think Paul's situation was much like that of Watchman Nee, imprisoned in China by the Communists until he died in the early 70's. The story told of his imprisonment was that the Communists could not keep the same guard around him for more than four hours, because they kept becoming Christians and they had to throw those guards in prison. **This is a life centered on proclaiming Christ – in every way.**

Persecution and suffering do not extinguish the flame of the gospel – they always serve to make it burn brighter. There is nothing like a little breeze of persecution to fan the flame: *And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.* Philippians 1:14 During China's Boxer Rebellion of 1900, rebels captured a mission station, blocked all the gates but one, and in front of that one gate placed a cross flat on the ground. Then the word was passed to those inside that any who trampled the cross underfoot would be permitted their freedom and life, but that any refusing would be shot. The first seven students trampled the cross under their feet and were allowed to go free. But the eighth student, a young girl, refused to trample the cross. Kneeling beside the cross in prayer for strength, she got up and walked around the cross, and went out to face the firing squad. Strengthened by her example, every one of the remaining ninety-two students followed her to the firing squad.

It has been said that the blood of the martyrs serves only to water the seed of the gospel. When the Communists took over China in the late 40's, it was estimated that there were 60 to 70 **thousand** believers in China. By the time the worst of the persecution and torture of Christians was passed in the early 1970's, it was found that there were now 60 to 70 **million** Christians in China and the number has grown tremendously since that time.

While most of the brothers were emboldened to preach the gospel, there were some who took advantage of the situation: *Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.* Philippians 1:15-17 These were not those who were preaching another gospel as Paul talks about in Galatians. These were apparently preaching the good news – people were getting saved – Paul says that Christ is proclaimed – but their motives were suspect.

I think these guys probably thought that Paul had seriously damaged the witness of Christianity by getting himself arrested. They probably reasoned that if Paul had kept his nose clean he wouldn't be in prison. They may have felt that it made them look bad to be associated with someone in prison. They may have been jealous of his ministry – Paul says they were preaching out of envy and rivalry – and they were even looking to hurt him in some way by doing so: *thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.*

But look at Paul's response: *What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice,* Philippians 1:18 What these guys did not understand is that the gospel does not spread because it has popular appeal. That is the world's way of doing things. Take your product, study the demographics, package the product with appeal, make it culturally relevant, and sell it. There are church growth strategies that use these techniques. But what they fail to appreciate is the fact that the gospel has been culturally relevant for 2,000 years in every society and in every age, and the best church growth strategy ever devised uses persecution and suffering and dying as the means of growth.

Josef Tson, another Romanian pastor makes this point: *He was arrested by the secret police for publishing a sermon calling for the churches to refuse to submit to the Communist government's demand for control over their ministries. When an official told him he must renounce his sermon, he replied, "No, sir! I won't do that!" The official, surprised that anyone would respond so forcefully to the secret police, said, "Aren't you aware that I have the power of life and death over you?" "Sir, let me explain that to you," Tson said. "You see, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. . . . You know that my sermons are spread all over the country on tapes. When you kill me, I only sprinkle them with my blood. They will speak 10 times louder after that, because everybody will say, 'That preacher meant it because he sealed it with his blood.' So go on, sir, kill me. When you kill me, I win the supreme victory."*

Paul knew that. That is why he could say: *for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.* Philippians 1:19-20 He knew the Philippians were partnering in prayer with him – for the gospel. Notice that he didn't ask them to pray that God would send another earthquake to get him out of prison. Whether he was in prison, or out of prison, whether he was slandered or spoken well of, whatever circumstance he found himself in, the gospel was his priority and passion. **He was insistent that in every way, whether by living or dying, Christ was proclaimed.**

Our good and gracious heavenly Father,

Thank you for good beginnings in Christ and the assurance that once that good work is begun You promise to bring us all the way to glory. Confirm in us our faith by the tangible effects of Your grace in our lives. Help us to plumb the depths of this gospel walk in joyful obedience to prove and approve the excellencies of the gospel in our lives. Grant it Lord that our hearts overflow with Your love so that our burning desire would be to proclaim Christ in every way. Don't let us settle for a mediocre faith and a life consumed with personal comfort and safety. May the gospel ignite a passion in our hearts that make us the most radical risk-takers for the sake of Your name in the earth. Fill our souls with the preciousness and delight of knowing You and spreading Your joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.