

# God Began a Good Work and Will Finish It

Philippians 1:1-14

Key Verse: 1:6

**“...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”**

Paul wrote this letter toward the end of his first imprisonment in Rome. This imprisonment had begun in Jerusalem, where he was arrested without any clear charge. To protect his life, he was transferred to Caesarea, and held there for two years as a political favor to the Jews (Ac 24:27). Then he was sent to Rome, where he spent another two years in prison (Ac 28:30). To stay in prison for even one day would make someone sad, helpless, and desperate. But Paul had been in chains for at least four years. His letter should have been full of doom and gloom. He could have had a sense of loss and been sorrowful. Bitterness could have hardened his heart. He could have complained and blamed others, especially Jewish leaders and Roman officials. He could have lost his vision and become cynical about the future. Sometimes we feel bound mentally or spiritually. We lose the joy of life and fall into a sense of loss and failure. When we look at hard situations around us we feel uncertain about our personal lives and our ministry. We lose hope and vision for the future, and feel powerless and blame others. But Paul was different. He was full of joy, hope and vision. It was because he had confidence in the Lord for his personal life and for gospel ministry. This confidence enabled him to overcome all the hardships of prison life and make a new history. Let's learn the confidence that Paul had and what it means to us. We can divide this passage into two parts: “Partnership in the gospel” (1-11) and “Advance the gospel” (12-14).

## **I. Partnership in the gospel (1-11)**

In this passage the key words are “**partnership in the gospel,**” which related Paul and Timothy in Christ in verses 1-2, and Paul and the Philippians in Christ in verses 3-8. Paul shared his prayer for the Philippians in verses 9-11.

**First, “Paul and Timothy” (1-2).** Verse 1a says, “**Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus....**” Paul included Timothy as a sender of this letter, as he also did in 2 Corinthians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Timothy was a like a son to Paul. Yet Paul regarded him with respect as a coworker. It was possible in Christ. Christ makes parents and children, old and young, the Silent Generation and Millennials happy partners in the gospel.

# God Began a Good Work and Will Finish It

Paul and Timothy identified themselves as servants of Christ Jesus. The word “servant” here actually means “slave.” In the past Paul had been a slave of sin, the law and self-righteousness. He was very proud. But when he met the Risen Christ, he was set free from the bondage of sin through the forgiving grace of Jesus at the cross. Now he became a servant of Christ Jesus, a man who belonged to Christ and served him humbly.

Paul sent this letter to **“all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons...”** (1b). In the past the Philippians and their leaders were sinners who deserved eternal punishment. But when they accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior, they became God's holy people in spite of their weaknesses and sins. Paul blessed them: **“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”** (2).

**Second, “I always pray with joy” (3-8).** Verses 3-4 say, **“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy....”** Paul had a special relationship with the Philippians, one filled with love and trust. So in all his prayers for all of them he always prayed with joy. When we pray for some people we feel joy, but for other people we may feel anguish. The Philippians were a source of thanks and joy to Paul not just once in a while, but always. How could Paul always pray for them with joy?

In the first place, it was because of their partnership in the gospel. Verse 5 says, **“...because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.”** Here the word “partnership” comes from the word “koinonia” in Greek, which means “fellowship.” There are many kinds of fellowships, such as sports teams, book clubs, music groups, Starbucks friends and so on. Super Bowl fellowship is coming next week. These fellowships are all based on common interests and benefits which draw like-minded people. They do not have universal relevance. They cannot include all people. And they do not last forever. However, partnership in the gospel is different. It is not man-centered, but Christ-centered. There is no hierarchy and no discrimination based on human standards. It includes all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds. Colossians 3:11 says, **“Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”** Members all share God's blessing together equally (Eph 3:6). The Philippian church members included such people as Lydia, a businesswoman from Thyatira, a tough jailer and his household, and perhaps a former slave girl. These people had no reason to get together. But because of the gospel, they gathered together and had fellowship in the Lord.

# God Began a Good Work and Will Finish It

Fellowship or partnership is an essential part of joyful Christian life. Yet in this individualistic age, many do not recognize its significance in their practical lives. Christian life is like a cross. The vertical line is to have fellowship with God personally. The horizontal line is to have fellowship with other believers. Some people neglect the vertical line and focus on the horizontal line. They inevitably become human-centered and cannot enjoy spiritual blessing; it does not last long. Some people neglect the horizontal line, thinking that personal fellowship with God is everything. But they cannot grow in a healthy way and become vulnerable. We need personal fellowship with God. At the same time, we need fellowship among believers. In the Christian fellowship, Christ is the head of the church, and it should be filled with the living words of God. It is a place where our sins are forgiven by Christ, and we forgive each other. We receive God's love and love one another. We willingly serve one another sacrificially. We pray for each other with genuine concern. The Holy Spirit dwells among us and blesses each of us with gifts to be used for the common good. This fellowship in the gospel never ends, because it is created by God, not by man. Participating in Christian fellowship is vital to living a joyful, victorious life in Christ.

In verse 6 Paul encouraged them by expressing his confidence in God. Let's read verse 6. **"...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."** Here **"good work"** does not mean good deeds; it means salvation and sanctification. There is no better work in the world than the salvation of lost souls. It is God who begins this good work. When we review Philippian church history, Paul did not choose to go there by his own will; it was the Holy Spirit who led him there (Ac 16:6-10). When Paul preached the gospel to some women, it was the Lord who opened Lydia's heart to receive the message (Ac 16:14). It was the Lord who performed a miracle that led the Philippian jailer to accept the gospel. The Philippians needed to remember this. It is easy to forget what God has done. During Paul's long imprisonment, they could have doubted that they could keep gospel faith, or that the ministry would continue. Paul helped them to look at God. God began the work, and God would finish the work. Paul wrote in 2:13, **"...it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."** Sometimes we start a good work with great vision. But as we face challenges, we get discouraged, regret that we started and give up. But God is not like man. God does not start something and then stop before finishing. God finishes what he starts. God is faithful. God never fails (1 Th 5:24). Paul's confidence was not based on his own willpower, feelings and experience. It was based on God's faithfulness, God's unfailing love, God's

## God Began a Good Work and Will Finish It

sovereign power, and God's good purpose. This confidence in the Lord enabled Paul to pray with joy.

In the second place, Paul could pray for the Philippians with joy because they shared in God's grace with him (7-8). Let's read 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." Usually people respond in one of two ways when someone is in difficulty. One response is to criticize and judge them, finding their faults and weaknesses. The other response is to understand them, encourage them, comfort them, and try to help them. In this way they build up a trust relationship. Since Paul had been in prison for a long time, some people criticized him and tried to stir up trouble for him. They were like those who put salt in a wound. Their intention was to discredit Paul, but they also discredited the gospel that Paul preached. But the Philippians were different. They encouraged Paul and helped defend and confirm the gospel. It was because they trusted Paul and the gospel itself. This is how they shared in God's grace with Paul. When Paul thought about what the Philippians had done, the affection of Christ burned in his heart and he longed for all of them (8). So he prayed for them with joy.

**Third, "This is my prayer" (9-11).** Paul not only gave thanks for their love and service, but also prayed for them. Let's read verses 9-11. **"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may 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."** The Philippian believers had already shown the fruit of love. They knew the love of God, loved one another, and loved Paul. But their love needed to abound more and more. In verse 9, the phrase, "knowledge and depth of insight" could better be translated "knowledge and discernment."<sup>1</sup> Here we learn that love is accompanied by knowledge and discernment. If we have love without knowledge, we can actually damage others instead of building them up. We need knowledge in order to practice love properly. This knowledge is not just factual information about God's word; it is experiential knowledge of God which comes through obedience. We can grow in the knowledge of God. Love also must have discernment. If we love without discernment, we can spoil people and make them sick. Romans 12:9 says, "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." In verse 10, "discern" comes from the Greek word "dok-im-ad'-zo" which means "approve."<sup>2</sup> Growing in the love of God requires approving of what is best. It is fairly easy to discern what

# God Began a Good Work and Will Finish It

is right and wrong. But it is much harder to discern what is best from the better. So there is a saying that “the better is the enemy of the best.”

Then, what is the best? We can learn from Paul. Apostle Paul had great knowledge. But when he encountered the Risen Jesus, he realized that all the knowledge he had was like “garbage” (3:8). So he considered everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus. Knowing Christ Jesus is the best. Paul confessed, **“I want to know Christ - Yes, to know the power of his resurrection and the participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death”** (3:10). When their love grew in knowledge and discernment, they could be pure and blameless and filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, self-control and so on (10b-11). Then they would be ready to meet Jesus when he comes.

## **II. Advance the gospel (12-14)**

In verses 12-14, Paul tells how God used him to advance the gospel even when he was in chains. Through this, Paul wanted to encourage the Philippians and plant faith in God. Verse 12 says, **“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.”** Jesus said, “If the shepherd is struck, the sheep of the flock will be scattered” (Mk 14:27). Satan attacks leaders all the time. When Paul was put in prison, the Philippian believers could have worried that the gospel work might diminish, or even vanish. But surprisingly, the gospel was advancing, not diminishing. The Greek word for “advance” here is “prok-op-ay” which indicates moving forward against resistance. It evokes the image of an explorer going through dense forest underbrush in steady progression.<sup>3</sup> When Paul used this word “advance” it meant that the gospel was going forward despite many obstacles. So Paul could challenge these obstacles, believing that God was at work. God had given Paul a vision to evangelize Rome. Paul believed that the Romans needed the gospel, for it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes (Ro 1:16). Paul looked for a way to carry out God’s vision. Then he found that the palace guards were coming to him on a regular basis, rotating every four hours. The palace guard was composed of 9,000 hand-picked soldiers who were strong, tall and able. They were like the Navy Seals. They surrounded the Roman Emperor and went in and out of the palace freely. They had a powerful influence on the election of the Roman Emperor. In a word they were the elite of the Roman Empire. With their chests protruding proudly, they went to Paul, thinking they were in charge of him. Generally, prisoners are afraid of their captors. Due to their fear and insecurity, they cannot imagine talking to them as equals. But Paul was

## God Began a Good Work and Will Finish It

different. Paul had a shepherd's heart for them. So he saw them as Bible students. He listened to them and understood their problems and agonies, such as quarrels with their wives, trouble with rebellious kids, and grudges against officers and fellow soldiers. Then he shared the gospel with them, telling of the love of God and the forgiveness of sins. The hardened Roman soldiers began to cry and then confess all their dirty sins and to ask Paul's prayer. Many of them came to salvation in Christ and to love Paul like a spiritual father. They talked about Jesus' grace with their fellow soldiers and their wives. Soon the whole palace guard and everyone else knew that Paul was in chains for Christ. In this way God used Paul in prison to proclaim the gospel powerfully. This may have been foundational in evangelizing the Roman Empire. It inspired Christians around the world with confidence in the Lord to proclaim the gospel boldly (14).

We wonder how Paul could overcome himself and the adverse situation. He not only kept his gospel faith, but he challenged the situation and experienced the power of God to advance the gospel. In verses 6 and 14 the word "confidence" is repeated. Paul had confidence in the Lord. His confidence inspired others to be confident in the Lord and to challenge adverse situation by proclaiming the gospel without fear. Paul was confident that God who began a good work would carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Paul didn't fix his eyes on himself or his environment. He fixed his eyes on Jesus. His mind and heart were full of Christ. He believed that his life and gospel ministry were not in the hands of the Romans or other people, but were in the hands of the Sovereign God. He was sure that it was God who began his work in them and it was God who would finish his work in them. People may come and go, and situations may change, but God will work steadily without fail to accomplish his good purpose. When Paul had confidence in the Lord, he could overcome all kinds of hardships and be full of joy, vision and hope. Furthermore, he could see the palace guard with a shepherd's heart and proclaim the gospel to them.

When we see ourselves and an environment that is hostile to the gospel, we easily become uncertain, fearful and anxious. We feel that our situation is like that of a prisoner in chains. We feel overwhelmed by pressures of school study or work, demands of our families, the challenge of managing our finances, and pressing problems in regards to ministry. When we think of these we lose the joy of life and become like zombies. We lose vision and hope and fall into depression. But God is working among us. God is faithful. God is living and almighty. God is the Sovereign Ruler. God works for the good (Ro 8:28). We have to fix our eyes on God. When we have this confidence in the Lord, we can overcome all kinds of hardships and can challenge our situation by faith. Then God can transform our

## God Began a Good Work and Will Finish It

prison cell into paradise, and use us to advance the gospel. We can be full of joy and sing a hymn, “Walking in sunlight all of my journey, Over the mountains, thro’ the deep vale. Jesus has said, ‘I’ll never forsake thee.’ Promise divine that never can fail! Heavenly sunlight, heavenly sunlight, Flooding my soul with glory divine! Hallelujah! I am rejoicing, Singing His praises. Jesus is mine.” Let’s pray to have confidence in the Lord - that he who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

<sup>1</sup> See the NASB, NKJV, ESV.

<sup>2</sup> See NASB, NKJV, ESV, KJV.

<sup>3</sup> “MacArthur, John, 2001. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Philippians. Chicago, Illinois, USA: Moody Publishers.”