

Philippians 1:1-11

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 July 2015

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Well, the holidays have begun. Yippee! We've managed to dispatch our youngest off to camp.

That was yesterday. Now, from my perspective, I think it would be great if we had the system that they have in the States. At least that's what I've heard, that kids go off to camp for the whole summer. I think that would be a great system. I hate to think what the fees are like, but it's just a week. But a week is better than nothing. So, off to camp and back next Saturday, all being well. Now, I do appreciate that many of you aren't on holiday, but you may be, even if you're not on holiday yet, looking forward to a well-earned break at some point over the summer. And as you've been thinking about your summer holiday, if you're kind of my generation, you may have been humming Cliff Richard's summer holiday, no more working for a week or two, or not, as the case may be. But a holiday is always something that we look forward to and welcome.

But being a contrary sort, I want to celebrate the start of the holidays thinking about work. I want us to consider the subject of good work. And this morning, we'll think about a good work that God does and is doing. And this evening, we'll think about a good work that we are called to do.

Now, we're going to look at different texts, quite distinct passages, but with that unifying theme, a good work of God, as we find it described in the passage read, and then this evening, God willing, thinking about a good work that we are commended by God to do ourselves as believers. Well, we'll come to that in due course. But this morning, we want to focus on a good work of God, as referred to and described by the Apostle Paul in this letter that he writes to the Christians in Philippi.

And let's just read again verses 4 to 6, which is at the heart of the passage that we've already read, but within which we have this very explicit reference to a good work that God is doing.

[2 : 28] So Philippians chapter 1, reading from verse, well, let's read from verse 3. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 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 makes reference there in these words to a good work of God. Well, what can we say or learn about this good work of God? There's a number of things we're going to identify, and I won't anticipate what they are. I'll just look at them one by one in turn. And the first thing that I want you to notice about this good work is that it is God's work in you. It is God's work in you. Now, it is worth explicitly highlighting and making the point that God is the author of the work that Paul is describing and celebrating. The he of he who began a good work in you. There in verse 6, he who began a good work in you. The he is, of course, in reference to God. God has begun a good work in you. He is the author of the work that is being referred to, that is being in a measure described by the apostle. Our God is a working

God. If anything dignifies work, it is this reality. God works, and God's work is always good.

We need to cast away any idea that we have, that we often do have, that work is somehow a necessary evil, simply a means to an end, a way of, if it's paid employment, well, a way of securing income to survive or to buy what we need to buy, a necessary evil. That is by no means the biblical perspective of work. Indeed, God himself is presented to us. He presents himself to us as a working God.

Work is good, and God's work is always good work. God doesn't do average. God doesn't do mediocre. God doesn't do unfinished, as we'll notice just in a moment, very particularly.

[5 : 20] But Paul's concern is not with every work that God does or is doing, but specifically the work he is doing in you, as he speaks to the believers there in Philippi, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you. So Paul is being specific. He's speaking about some particular work. Not all of God's work. That's not what he's concerned about. He's concerned about a

particular work. This work that he describes as God doing in you. And those words that he uses, God's work in you, the detail there both identifies those in whom God is working, but also identifies one aspect of the nature of the work in question. First of all, the words identify those in whom God is working. Who are they? Well, all we need to do to discover who they are is discover who Paul is speaking to or who he's writing to. Who are the you there in verse 6? Who began a good work in you? Well, clearly they are the recipients of the letter.

And there in verse 1, we discover who they are to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi. So the work that he is speaking of is a work that God is doing in the lives of the saints in Philippi in the first instance, they're the ones that the letter is addressed to. This is a work that God does, is doing in the lives of the believers. We can, of course, legitimately extend this to all the saints or believers in every age and in every place. And so that would include us if we are believers in Jesus Christ. If we are saints in Christ Jesus, if we are of those who have been set apart by God as he's enabled us to put our trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, then this work is a work that God does in us, but not beyond those who are saints in Christ Jesus. This is a work that God does in the lives of believers. If you are a Christian, then this is a work that we're going to look at now and try and describe. This is a work that God is doing in you. But those words of Paul when he speaks of a good work in you also gives some insight into one aspect of the nature of the work. It is a work in the believer.

This is not a work in the first instance for or on behalf of the believer, though that is true. It is very particularly a work of God in the believer, in our hearts, in our lives. This is a work on the inside, on your inside. It is a work in you. But what is it? What is this work of God in you, in us, in me, in you? What is it? Well, that takes us on to the second thing that I want you to notice from our passage. Not only is it God's work in you, but it is God's perfecting work of salvation.

It is God's work of salvation, but in this particular aspect, his perfecting work. Now, what do we mean by that when we speak of God's perfecting work of salvation? When we speak about, when we think about God's saving work on behalf of sinners, such as we all are, we can distinguish between the accomplishment of God's saving work and the application of God's saving work. Certainly, that's one way of considering God's saving work. That's a distinction we can make. God accomplished or secured our salvation by the historic saving acts of Jesus. That is how our salvation was secured in history. The Father sent his Son to die on the cross in our place, and on that cross, salvation was secured. And so, in a very real way and in a very legitimate sense, Jesus could cry out, it is finished. It is accomplished, as those words are sometimes translated. It's done. It's a done deal.

The work has been done. Salvation, redemption has been accomplished. But then, of course, there is the application of what Jesus has done in our lives, in your life, in the life of believers.

[10:23] And that is also, in a very real sense, part of God's saving work, as he applies what Jesus has done in our lives. And that is what is being spoken of here. What is being spoken of is God's saving work as it is applied to us as his people.

It is about how, in time and space, in our lives, in our own individual circumstances, God applies his saving work.

But we can narrow things down a little more as we think about what this work is. Even within the broader picture of God applying the saving work of Christ in our lives, Paul here is particularly concerned with one aspect of that application of Christ's saving and work, namely, his work of perfecting or sanctifying his people.

The work that Paul here is speaking about is a work of perfecting believers, of perfecting or sanctifying Christians.

It is a continuing work. It is not yet complete, as the language very clearly not only implies but declares. This is something that God will carry on to completion.

[12:00] It is in process. It is not yet complete. It is a continuing work. The term that is sometimes used for this aspect of God's saving work in our lives is sanctification.

Now, that word is a word that can speak or can mean a once and for all setting apart of a sinner for God. We are sanctified.

We are sanctified. We are set apart. But it is commonly used to speak of what Paul is concerned with here, this lifelong process whereby God works in us, perfecting us, sanctifying us.

Now, what does that mean or what is the end in view? Well, this is the most wonderful thing when we think about what the end in view is. The end in view is that we, you and me, would be transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

That is the goal. That is the end. That is what's happening. God is transforming us into the likeness of Jesus. Now, we say that and we look in the mirror and we say, well, that doesn't seem to be happening in my life.

[13:13] But that is what's happening. Even when it doesn't appear to be happening, even when it appears to be happening very, very slowly, even when it appears that things are going backwards instead of forwards, in God's purposes and in God's reality, which is our reality, that is what is happening.

That is what God is doing. He is bringing to, he is carrying on a work that he has begun to completion in the day or until the day of Christ Jesus.

This is what the same Apostle Paul refers to in Romans chapter 8 and verse 29 when he speaks of believers being conformed to the image or likeness of his Son.

This is the ultimate purpose, we might say, certainly in regards to where we stand. Or God's purpose is in us. His purpose in salvation is that we would become like his Son, like Jesus.

This is God's purpose for you, that you be brought to completeness or perfection, bearing the image or likeness of Jesus.

[14:27] Think about that for a moment in the light of Paul speaking of this work of God as a good work, he who began a good work in you.

Speculate for a moment, and it's really speculation that borders on the foolish, but speculate for a moment that as God you would be looking down on broken, imperfect sinners such as we all are. And your thought is, what is the very best that I can do for these broken and vulnerable and imperfect and flawed men and women?

What is the very best I could do for them? Well, the very best that God could do for us is to transform us into the image of his Son, and that is what he is doing.

God has determined to do for us the very best. There is nothing better that he could do for you.

Nothing better. The very best that he could do is what he is doing.

[15:31] That is the work that he has begun. And that is the work that is carrying on, and that he will carry on to completion. So this is a work of God in you.

It is God's perfecting work of salvation, but it is also a work that God has begun, is continuing, and will complete. Now that's very clear in our text.

Indeed, we've already in the passing made reference to that. But I want to more explicitly think about this reality, that this is a work that has a beginning, has a present, and has a conclusion.

That is very strikingly clear in what Paul says, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.

The past, the present, and the future in such brief compass in these few words of the apostle. Let's just think of this reality of these stages, if you wish, of God's work.

[16:39] He who began a good work in you. And the verb that Paul uses here carries the idea of a decisive and deliberate act of God to inaugurate our Christian life or experience.

But to where do we trace the beginning? He who began a good work in you. In your own life, can you trace that beginning?

Paul clearly has in mind a beginning. He knows these people. He knows the Christians in Philippi. He was instrumental in bringing the gospel to them and seeing the first converts.

So in his own mind, it's very clear the time reference. He who began a good work in you. And I think in Paul's mind, the beginning that he's referring to in this verse is the time when the people he's writing to heard the gospel and responded to it and put their trust in Jesus, the time of their conversion, the time of their becoming Christians.

This is the beginning of God's work in them. When we think of the beginning of that work as being altogether God's work, it is striking to notice how in the book of Acts we have described how the very first convert in Philippi, this very church that Paul is writing to, how the very first convert's experience of coming to faith is described.

[18:13] In Acts chapter 16 and verse 14, we read of Lydia. And what does it say about Lydia and the manner in which her Christian life began, her beginning when God began to work in her?

How was that? What did that look like? Well, what are we told there in Acts chapter 16 and verse 14? The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

It is God's work. It is all God's work. Lydia, incapable of even responding to the message in the absence of God's work opening her heart.

So there is a beginning to this work. Of course, it's true. When we think of the bigger picture of God's work of salvation, it's true that the beginning can go back beyond our own individual experience.

Indeed, it goes back into eternity before the foundation of the world when God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless, the very goal in mind that Paul speaks of here.

[19 : 25] At the very beginning, before the foundation of the world, we were chosen in Christ. But here Paul's concern is with the believer's own experience of that salvation.

So when here he speaks of the work that God has begun, I think he very clearly has in mind when they first became Christians, believed the truth, and put their trust in Jesus.

Now we've mentioned Lydia. And in the case of Lydia, for Lydia herself, for Paul as he would consider her and others, it would have been easy for them to trace to a day, to an occasion, the beginning of their Christian experience.

And Lydia, no doubt, would have been able to testify as to how she often did. Yes, on this day, Paul came and he opened up the Word of God, he explained the Gospel, and I believed.

Now, of course, that's not always the case. It's not always possible for believers to trace with that degree of precision the beginning of our Christian experience.

[20 : 37] Perhaps especially those who are brought up in Christian homes. And that, of course, is a great privilege, but for such it's often more difficult. And that's not unusual and nothing to be lamented, not being able with that kind of precision to say, well, that is my beginning.

But whether we can trace or pinpoint with that degree of precision isn't really of great importance. What is important is that God begins a work in each of us.

It is His work. It is a work that He begins. So the beginning or foundation of our Christian experience is God's work.

And this is crucial for us to be clear on for our own assurance of salvation. If our assurance is built on our work, on our choosing Christ, on our repenting of our sins, then it is a fragile foundation.

But if our assurance is rather grounded in the reality that God willed our salvation and in our experience, He began, He began His good work in us, then we are standing on a firm foundation.

[21 : 54] Because as we will see in a moment, what God begins, God finishes. So the first, in terms of the time that is presented here, the order of events, if you wish, you have this beginning.

But then Paul says that God will carry on that work. He who began a good work in you will carry it on. Having begun, God continues or carries on His work in us.

He has been working since the beginning, is working now, and will continue to work until the job is done. God does not give up on us. God will not give up on you.

How does God do that? What does this present work of God look like? Well, the present work of God in our lives involves everything that happens to us.

In every experience of every day, God is working to mold us into the image of His Son. Everything has a purpose, and everything has a good purpose.

[23 : 02] A couple of Sundays ago, when I was away in Lough Cannon at the evening service, we had Bruce McLeod taking the service, and I was listening to some of the sermon online. I didn't manage to hear all of it.

But I noticed that he was speaking about or preaching on verses in Romans 8, verses 28 to 29. And precisely there you have this point made so clearly, that all things work together for good, for those who love God.

But then in the following verse, it makes clear what the purpose is, that working together, that we would be transformed into the image, the likeness of Jesus.

It may appear to you that God's work in your life is at a standstill, but that is not the case. God continues to work, sometimes, maybe often, even without your cooperation.

Now that is not to justify our lack of cooperation, but it is to recognize this tremendous reality, that the work that God has begun is a work that God continues to do with or without cooperation.

[24 : 11] His purposes will not be thwarted. He will work, and He does work. So He carries it on in the present. Then, of course, there's the final aspect of this, that He carries it on to completion.

The outcome is guaranteed. God is working to a schedule, and the day of completion is fixed in the Father's diary. Namely, as Paul says, the day of Christ Jesus.

That is the final day. That's the completion day of God's work in your life. On that day, when Jesus returns for His own, the transforming work of God in your life will be culminated and completed.

It will be brought to completion. We all know in our lives, in our work, in observing all that is around us, we all know about unfinished work.

Governments begin grandiose schemes that are never completed. Councils devise city center regeneration schemes that may in the dim and distant future be partially completed.

[25 : 23] They can occupy pages in the press and journal. It all looks wonderful. All that's going to be done. But we know that in the real world, these things don't generally get completed. Things are left undone or unfinished or partially done.

That's our reality. We know in our own personal lives, we sometimes have grand intentions to begin a personal project. Indeed, our intention is to finish that project.

But we never quite get around to bringing it to completion often. Not so with God. What God begins, He finishes. What He has begun in you, He will bring to completion.

Notice that Paul uses language that speaks of his own certainty on this matter. He doesn't simply state that it's so, though that would be sufficient. He states it in such clear and vigorous terms.

Look at the verse. Being confident of this, being sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

[26 : 35] There is no doubt in Paul's mind that the work that has begun will be completed. Why is Paul so confident? Because his confidence does not rest on how good the Philippians are, on how great Christians they are, and how faithful they are.

No, his confidence rests on the promises and the faithfulness of God. What God has begun, God finishes. The perseverance of the saints, of us, rests on God's perseverance with the saints.

On that we can be confident and sure. Your ultimate salvation, the completion of God's work in you, is as assured as the coming of that day when Jesus will return.

It is as sure as the reality that He will return on that day for His people. Let me just notice one final thing that we can draw out from what Paul says here.

And that is that this work is a work of God on your inside, but that is visible on the outside. We've already said at the beginning that the work that Paul is describing is God's work in you.

[27 : 54] And it's all of God from beginning to end. But this work of God on the inside must be visible on the outside.

To get to what I'm trying to say, we could ask the question, how does Paul know that God is at work in the lives of the Philippians? How does he know that? He's declaring that it is so.

He is confident that God is continuing to work in them. How does he know that? What is the evidence that he is able to witness that leads him to that conclusion?

Well, he tells us what the evidence says. If we limit ourselves to what he says in the immediately preceding verse, he's thanking God every time he remembers them. And then in verse 5 we read, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

In these words, Paul is demonstrating or is declaring the evidence that he has for concluding that God has begun a work in them. And it's twofold, though very much related.

[28 : 59] It's their partnership in the gospel and their perseverance in the faith. These constitute the evidence that he sees on the outside of God's work on the inside.

Let's think of this phrase that he uses, your partnership in the gospel. What does this mean? What does that look like? Well, given the context of the letter, it seems likely that Paul has in mind the generosity of the Philippians in providing for his material needs.

This letter is one of the letters that is called one of the prison letters that Paul writing in chains, in prison. And the Philippians particularly had been concerned to provide for him in those circumstances.

At the very end of the letter, he very explicitly thanks them for their gifts. In chapter 4 and verse 10, we read, I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me.

Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. And then he continues. Their partnership in the gospel, in supporting him, in his need, in his difficulties.

[30 : 09] But their generosity, of course, extended way beyond their help to Paul. We're told of how in this matter of generous support for believers in need, the Philippians excelled.

In 2 Corinthians, when Paul is writing to the believers in Corinth, he speaks of them and presents them as an example of those who are generous. In 2 Corinthians chapter 8, and from the beginning, and now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

And Philippi was the principal Macedonian church. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

And he continues. Their partnership in the gospel. And these things were visible. Paul could see that. He received the gift from them. He could see the manner in which, out of their poverty, they were giving for those in need.

This was visible, tangible evidence on the outside of God's work on the inside. It is God's work.

[31 : 19] It is all of God. But God's work is visible. It becomes evident in the lives of the believers.

And I think this phrase, your partnership in the gospel, can be understood indeed more broadly than the examples that we've given.

To include their every involvement in making the gospel known by word and deed. Their partnership in the gospel. This is the evidence that God is at work in them.

Their partnership in the gospel, but also, and very related, their perseverance in the gospel. Their perseverance in the faith. Because what does Paul say there? Because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

When God began the work in you until now. You continue. You persevere. You continue in what God has begun. And that demonstrates to me, says Paul, implies Paul, that God is at work in you. And so I'm confident that He has begun a work, that He will continue that work, and He will bring it to completion. Of course, this evidence that we're speaking of also serves as a timely reminder that the work of God in our lives is ever to be accompanied by our work for God.

[32 : 42] He works in us that we might work for Him. Well, let me just say as we close, that this work of God is ultimately a work for God, a work for God's praise and glory.

Paul continues as he writes to the Philippians here at the beginning of his letter, and notice how he looks forward to that day when they will be pure and blameless. In verse 10, he's praying that that day would hasten, that they would be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.

And then what does he go on to say? Be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. That ultimately this work of God in the believers would then result in praise and glory to the very God who is working in them.

God is at work. He is at work in you. He has begun and will bring to completion His perfect and perfecting work in your life. And He does so to the glory and praise of His own name.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word and we thank You for Your work in us. We thank You that You have begun a work in us, that You are carrying it on, and that You will bring it to completion.

[34 : 12] And we thank You that we can state this with confidence, even though we're so conscious of how short we fall, even though we're so conscious of how stubborn we are to cooperate with You, to respond to the work that You are doing.

But we thank You that even though we are guilty of all of these things, Your purposes are not frustrated or thwarted in any way, for You are a God who completes what You have begun.

And we thank You that that is the ground of our security, the ground of our confidence. It was the ground of Paul's confidence that he could say of the believers, I am certain of this.

And may it also be the grounds of our confidence that we are certain of this, trusting in and resting in You and in Your character and in Your faithfulness.

And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.