

Paul's letter to the Philippians: joyfully living for Christ in the face of opposition.

The confident, prayerful growth of God's people.

Philippians 1:1-11

[Image of Alex Ferguson on screen]

Even if, like me, you have only a passing interest in football, you are still likely to know something about this man, Alex Ferguson. His face has appeared in a lot of news coverage in recent weeks following the announcement of his retirement from managing Manchester United Football Club.

In Sir Alex's 26 years at the club - itself a record that is expected to remain unchallenged in the sport's current era - he has racked up a significant record of success, winning 38 trophies, 13 league titles, two Champions League crowns, five FA Cups and four League Cups, not to mention the development of the club into a global brand. I remember seeing a bar in a small village in Rwanda that was advertising the opportunity to watch the Manchester United game that evening. And a 2011 Brand Finance report valued the club's trademarks and associated intellectual property at a staggering £412m.

Undoubtedly he has built a strong team around him, and yet it will be the name of Sir Alex Ferguson that is associated with this era of unprecedented success for the club, both on the pitch and off it.

But with that success comes an interesting challenge when it comes to a time of transition; how do you manage change in such a way that, as best you can, you protect the future success of the club? Amidst the many tributes, accolades and celebrations of his success, press coverage was carefully managed to reassure fans and investors that they can remain confident for the future of the club.

In spite of these best efforts however, a nervous stock market still saw an initial drop of 5% in the Manchester United share price.

Change and transition is undoubtedly an unsettling time, and one in which we often question the basis of our confidence.

So how does this relate to us? Well, I guess, as a church we are also in a time of transition, with lots of great things to look back on and thank God for, and much to commit in prayer to him about our future.

One of my personal highlights of the Annual Church Meeting of just a few weeks ago was the review of all that has happened, and all that we have been involved with, in just the last twelve months: supporting Amy in the Middle East, along with our other mission partners; the growth of

Aspire, our women's group; the strength and witness of TOFFs, our group for over fifty-fives, through what has undoubtedly been a tough year; supporting local churches through our Spurgeon's preaching group; faithful service in our music group, and in our youth work; the number of people involved in home groups.

And yet as we consider the coming months and years, we still face change and possibility of change. With a mixture of joy and pain we send Peter Comont and others from this church to be part of the new Trinity Church in central Oxford. As Tim and I and a small group of others continue to pray and plan for a missional church plant in Cowley. As we prayerfully consider the possibility of purchasing a church building that could better serve our ministry needs.

On the one hand it has been great to reflect on the many, many good things God is doing in us as his people, and in our midst.

On the other we are rightfully prayerful - maybe even concerned - as we commit some pretty ambitious plans to God for our future.

And I wonder how we pray? I wonder how we would like to see our prayers answered? I wonder what 'success', or fruitfulness, would look like for us as a church? How do we plan and pray to see our vision, our dreams, become a reality in this area, in this community, in the lives of the people God has put us amongst?

How do we live in such a way that marks us out as God's people? How is our 'confidence' doing this morning?

Well, I think the beginning of our series in Philippians is actually quite timely, and I'm excited about all that God will teach us through this six week series.

As we'll see in this deeply affectionate letter to the church in Philippi, there is much for Paul to give thanks for. Paul's gives thanks to God for their partnership in the gospel, they are standing firm in spite of opposition, he commends them for their faithful obedience, they have supported Paul in prayer and by working to meet some of his practical needs.

In many ways, there are lots of reasons for Paul to feel a sense of pride as he sees some of the success of his ministry.

And yet Paul writes this letter from prison, most likely in Rome, and under the very real threat of the death penalty. Whilst he longs, desires and anticipates seeing these brothers and sisters again, there is an underlying recognition that this might not happen; he might not get opportunity to see them again, and this might, in fact, be the last communication he has with the church.

Away from the media spotlight, I wonder what Alex Ferguson is saying in private to his successor, David Moyes. I wonder what words of advice he will be sharing, as he briefs him on

the strengths and weaknesses of the team, in order to help Moyes hit the ground running and try to maintain some of Ferguson's success.

Well, as we read Philippians, we are privileged to read some of Paul's final words to a church in which he, too, longs to see continued faithfulness and fruitfulness in their ministry, and hear his priorities and concerns for them as they look to the future.

This morning we're going to be looking at just the first 11 verses of the letter which, I believe, calls us to at least three responses: to celebrate our God-given identity, to be confident about God's continuing work, and to pray for fruitful growth.

To celebrate our God-given identity, to be confident about God's continuing work, and to pray for fruitful growth.

Now I'm going to suggest we just read through those verses again as we start. I don't know if you're like me, but I actually find it quite difficult to concentrate at the start of Paul's letters. I often find that I have inadvertently tuned out during the initial greetings, and only realise I have done so about half-way through the first chapter. Maybe you're not like me in that regard, but I think it will help us just to read over the verses again. And if you are like me, I'm going to suggest some things I want you to be looking out for as we read.

Firstly, I want you to note Paul's feelings about the church. This is a deeply affectionate letter, that demonstrates Paul's love and concern for the church.

Secondly, listen out for the number of times in the space of a few short verses that Paul refers to Jesus.

Thirdly - and I know this sounds obvious, but it's important when it comes to our application of the text - try and read the verses remembering that they are written not to an individual, but to the church in Philippi - possibly even meaning more than one local expression of the church, but rather all of God's holy people in that city. And related to that, note the frequency with which Paul uses words like 'all', and 'every'.

So, three things: Paul's feelings about the church, the number of times Paul refers to Jesus, and remembering this is not written to an individual.

Let's read the passage again. [Read]

So, let's consider, firstly how this passage calls us to celebrate our God-given identity.

1. God's people can celebrate their God-given identity.

I'm sure most of you are familiar with this kind of document, a passport. On the one hand it's just a little purple book with lots of blank pages and a slightly embarrassing photo. But it represents something quite significant.

I hadn't realised how much I took my passport for granted until I lived in Moldova. Through my time there I came to appreciate how difficult it was for many of my friends to travel further than the neighbouring countries of Romania and Ukraine. Out of fear of economic migration - that Moldovan visitors might not return to Moldova - very few of my Moldovan friends had the same ability as I did to travel, simply because I held a British passport.

Citizenship is just one image the bible uses to help us think about what it means to be God's people, living under his kingship.

In this passage we see Paul using words and images that help us see our Christian identity as a privileged status, which is then expressed in different ways.

In v1, Paul opens his letter addressing the Philippians as *God's holy people, in Christ Jesus*. Similarly he describes himself and Timothy as *servants of Christ Jesus*. In v7 we see that Paul's sense of gratitude and joy comes from the fact that, "*all of you share in God's grace with me*".

God's holy people, in Christ Jesus, at Philippi. God's people, set apart to love and serve him. Securely found in Christ Jesus. Partakers in God's grace.

And those words of status are equally true for us, too, aren't they? God's holy people, in Christ Jesus, at Oxford. God's people, set apart to love and serve him. Securely found in Christ Jesus. Partakers in God's grace.

We also see that identity expressed in their *partnership in the gospel* (v5), and in the exhibition of *their love* (v9).

Paul prays with joy "*because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now*", and prays that their "*love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight*".

God's people have a God-given identity (holy people, servants, those who share in God's grace) that finds itself expressed in practical ways (as partners in the gospel, living out the good news of Jesus Christ together, loving God, loving neighbours, inviting others to hear the good news and respond to God's love).

Living in Moldova I came to better appreciate the privileges that a British passport brought, and also felt slightly embarrassed that these privileges were given to me, and not my Moldovan friends, because of something that neither I, nor they, had any control over - our place of birth.

My entitlement to a British passport has nothing to do with me, and yet it brings significant privileges that I still, regularly, take for granted.

Similarly, I did nothing to deserve my heavenly citizenship, and yet it was bought at great cost, and brings immense privilege.

When it comes to Christian identity, there are many books dealing with the challenge of assurance; of being confident in our salvation and Christian identity.

But I wonder whether a bigger issue for us is actually ambivalence; the challenge that we all too easily take our Christian identity for granted. Do we approach our heavenly citizenship with complacency, leading to ambivalence in our faith?

It's perhaps unsurprising that Paul goes to some length to reiterate the identity of the church at Philippi - our God-given identity is something we are foolish to become complacent about, and something we really ought to celebrate more exuberantly.

These truths about our status in Christ are amazing things. Let's continue to ponder them. Let these truths break into your week this week. Think of them often. Remind one another in your home groups.

How will these deep, important truths work their way out in your life this week? How will our life as a church be marked by our regular celebration of our status as God's people? I guess in some ways this is what we do at communion; celebrate our status as God's people.

God's people can and should, regularly celebrate their God-given identity.

2. God's people can be confident about God's continuing work.

I wonder how many of you recognise this building. Can someone tell me what it is and why it is famous?

The Sagrada Familia is a large basilica in Barcelona. It's famous mostly for being incomplete, or a work in progress. Designed by Gaudi, work commenced on the building in 1882. When he died in 1926, less than a quarter of the project was complete. Work has been interrupted by civil war, and has continued intermittently due to lack of finances. Currently the anticipated completion date is 2026.

After such a long period, I am sure there are many who have questioned whether the work would ever be complete. For both those living in Barcelona, and for those working on the basilica, the slow progress must be quite dispiriting, and it must be easy to question the wisdom of continuing to throw money at the project.

But I guess that's what the Christian life can feel like at times; a long slog, with little visible sign that we're making much progress. It can feel like an effort just to try and live faithfully each day, without always seeing much fruit, and with the danger of losing perspective of the bigger picture.

The same is true in our corporate witness as a church, too. We faithfully put on events at Christmas for example, year after year, building great relationships with the local community, but wouldn't it be great if we saw a greater number of people showing an interest in faith, or coming to Jesus; to see more visible fruit for these efforts?

Or even in our discipleship as a church; it can be tiring as we continue to see ourselves struggling with the same issues and battles with sin, despite regularly praying for God to change our attitude and behaviour. Sometimes it just feels like there is such little progress. Will God's work in us ever be done?

Paul writes with confidence that the work God has begun in the Philippian church, he will continue, to completion, until the day of Christ Jesus.

Paul has observed the beginnings of the church in Philippi - seen God bring individuals to faith and the birth of the church in that city. He writes to affirm them in the good that he sees, demonstrated in their partnership and love. God has been at work to build and strengthen the church there.

We note that Paul is grateful to God, for this is *his* work - both in purpose and action. And because of that Paul can write and pray with confidence that God will continue that work, to completion, until the day of Christ Jesus.

This is where I feel it's important to note that this is written to the church, to a group of believers; we need to be wary of reading this as we are sometimes inclined to do so, that God will continue his work in me, even though that also is true.

The problem with reading v6 in this way, however, is we run into a problem of chronology - how does God's work continue in me, to completion, until the day of Christ Jesus - that final day when Christ returns to usher in his kingdom fully and finally - if I die before that day? At the point of my death, whether that is tomorrow, or in 50 years time, God will have completed his work in me, whether or not Jesus has returned.

Rather I think we need to remember that God will continue to do his work in his church, to completion, until the day of Christ Jesus. God is faithful to his people, both individually and corporately.

God will continue his work in the Philippian church - his gathered people in Philippi - even today, bringing his witness through the church to completion, until the day of Christ Jesus.

Whilst the Sagra Familia in Barcelona is not yet finished, it is still a beautiful and functional building. The expectation is that work will continue until it is completed.

Whilst the Church of Christ is not yet finished, it is still beautiful and functional. Even in our imperfections we demonstrate something of the wisdom of God to the world around us, and to the rulers and authorities in the spiritual realms.

And we can be supremely confident that this is God's work, and he will continue it, to completion, until the day of Christ Jesus.

God's people can be confident about God's continuing work.

3. God's people pray for fruitful growth.

We have seen Paul remind the church of their God-given identity, and of his confidence that God will continue the good work he has started, to bring it to completion.

Paul has written regarding what God has done in the past, and the present confidence we can take from that.

In v9 Paul turns to his attention to praying for the church's future, praying for fruitful growth, that their love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.

There are a couple of things that I think it would be helpful for us to note here.

Firstly, Paul's prayer is an expression of grateful joy, and we see this in verses 3, 4, 7 and 8: *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy... and in v7, It is right for me to feel this way about 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. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*

I wonder if that sounds like our prayers. I'm aware that this passage, and even this entire letter, has been something of a challenge to me about my own prayer life.

How often am I so thankful to God for who he is - as I'm prompted to remember day by day - that this is expressed in joyful prayer, as an overflow of deep, grateful joy?

In addition to the manner in which our prayers are expressed, Paul also prays specific things for the church; that they might have an ever-growing love.

As we've noted, v9 recognises the love that is already exhibited in the church - Paul doesn't pray for them to demonstrate love, but rather that their existing love might abound more and

more in knowledge and depth of insight, in order that they might be able to discern what is best and 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.

Firstly, Paul prays that their love would grow in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best (vv9-10): our love should grow alongside our knowledge of the things of God, enabling us to see to the heart of matters, grasping something as it really is, informed and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. As one commentator puts it, "...like other sorts of love, Christian love needs knowledge to know *what* to love, and discernment to know *how* to love. This is love modelled on the love of Christ, learned from Scripture, and applied in obedient living."

Secondly, he prays that the growth of their love would demonstrate itself in their inner life and outward behaviour (vv10-11), that we might be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. We need to be careful that we don't become religious about this - especially after a sermon series called Pharisees Anonymous - striving to do something on our own that proves we are right with God. But equally we should be concerned if our life does not display these characteristics in increasing measure, as God does his work in us.

And thirdly, Paul's prayer is that this ever-growing love will bring glory and praise to God. That the very result of our love growing in knowledge and depth of insight is not just that we might be pure and blameless, but that God receives glory for that. As we are filled with the fruit of righteousness, God receives glory as that is manifested in our lives.

It is an immense privilege to be able to come to God in prayer - to bring every detail of our lives before the creator of the world. I wonder how this passage might inform our prayers in the coming week. Perhaps this is something to ponder together in home groups this week. With all that lies ahead of us as a church, how might this passage inform and shape our prayers?

God's people pray for fruitful growth.

I wonder how we are doing at that. How is your personal prayer life doing at the moment? How are we doing as a church? We have many opportunities to gather to pray together - on First Tuesdays, the prayer breakfasts on Thursday mornings, in our home groups, in our friendships with one another.

Do we long for these opportunities to meet together, that we might express our grateful joy to God?

Why don't we do that now, remembering that as those who share in God's grace, we can be confident of God's continued work, as we pray for God-honouring, fruitful growth.

Let's pray.