

Pentecost 16 (20 September 2020)
Do the first things – Philippians 1:1–11
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- 1:1–11 Do the first things first

What you do first thing in the morning often sets the trajectory for the rest of your day. What's the first thing you do when you get up in the morning? Do you get dressed, take your pills, watch the news, or do what I do sometimes and reach for my phone.

When I open my phone I find myself bombarded by the anxieties of this world. My Facebook feed will tell me that there's flooding overseas, or that another COVID outbreak has happened somewhere, or that the economy is about to collapse. When I do this first thing in the morning I end up feeling tired before I even start work and anxious throughout the day. There is a flood on after all!

Now imagine on a given day that I pick up the book of Philippians instead of my phone and read that instead of my screen? What would I read?:

'Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

What a breath of fresh air. Words of grace, free love, and peace, that thing we're all searching for but struggle to find.

When COVID-19 restrictions first hit, and we weren't able to meet we sent letters to our Ignite Youth Group and set them the challenge of reading Philippians in Isolation.

The response was awesome and gave me a taste of how exciting the future of our church is. One Ignite Youth member wrote that reading Philippians:

"makes me feel safe and happy to have a reminder that God is here for me and that nothing can bring God down. It also makes me feel like I can trust him and God will guide me to my victory no matter what!!"

What power coming out of a powerful book! Over the next 5 weeks we're going to be unpacking this powerful book ourselves and see what God has to say about the things we're anxious about.

- Why does Paul write to the Philippians?

So where does this book come from? Well Philippians is a letter written by a guy named Paul to Christians in a town called: Dalby, no Philippi of course. Philippi was like a retirement village for Roman soldiers. If you fought in the Roman army then upon discharge, you'd get some sweet property in Philippi to farm for the rest of your life.

Paul goes to Philippi and meets a businesswoman named Lydia who puts her faith in Jesus that day. He stays with Lydia but as Paul and his mate Timothy evangelise Philippi a slave girl who had a spirit in her which helped her tell the future follows him around in the marketplace screaming: "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you how to be saved."

She does this for a couple of days until Paul has enough and he turns around, prays for her, and God heals her. This upsets the woman's pimp who starts a riot and gets Paul landed in prison. In prison, Paul is praying at midnight when an earthquake strikes and the prison breaks down freeing him. The jailer wakes up, thinks he's lost all his prisoners and goes to kill himself but Paul stops him and tells him they're all there.

God saves the jailer's life not once in the earthquake, not twice from suicide, but three times that day as he hears the gospel and gets baptised that very morning. After this Paul is forced to leave but not without visiting Lydia who hosts the first church in Philippi.

So Paul writes from prison to a town where he had been in prison, to a church made up of a businesswoman, a jailer, and a former demon possessed fortune teller. They're living in a town of patriotic former soldiers trying to tell them that Jesus is King rather than the Roman emperor which got them in a lot of trouble. While they're under the pump they know Paul is in jail and so they send him money to buy food while he was in jail because Roman jails didn't feed their prisoners.

Paul's writes to say thank you for the funds but he's much more thankful for something else.

- But first, thanks! (Gratitude erodes anxiety)

He writes in v.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."

(Philippians 1:3-6)

Paul's sitting in prison but he bursts into this prayer of thanksgiving and joy. He's thankful for two things:

1. The first thing he's thankful for is that his friends are partnering with him in the gospel. The Philippians are actively involved in making Christ known, supporting Paul and telling others about Jesus. This brings joy to Paul who is so glad that the church is doing what it's supposed to do.
2. The second thing Paul's joyful about is that God is working in the Philippians. The fact that the Philippians are doing God's work is evidence that God is with them. Often you and I look for outward signs to see if God's with us. If I

enjoy good health, or people are being nice to me, or I can find a good car-park then God is with me. For Paul however, the fact that the Philippians are still meeting together, still telling their neighbours about Jesus, still raising money to resource Paul and other missionaries is proof that God is with them.

The Philippians will never lose their salvation, they'll always have a heavenly hope because God is always faithful his to his promises.

Notice how gratitude erodes anxiety. Paul was worried about the Philippians physical wellbeing but also their spiritual wellbeing. The care-pack he'd received from Philippi proved to him that the Philippians were staying true to God and that God was staying true to them. They had plenty to be worried about but Paul is making gratitude his first priority, 'what's good' is of first importance.

In 2003 scientists at the University of Miami got a random group of people together and split them into two groups. One group was asked to write daily about things there were grateful for. The other group was asked to write daily about their irritations and hassles. After 10 weeks the gratitude group felt more hopeful and positive about their lives. The study even found they were exercising more and had fewer trips to the doctors than the group than the group focussed on hassles.

Friends this shouldn't surprise us. God is showing us in his word that gratitude erodes anxiety. God has given us the breath in our lungs, the beat in our hearts, the food on our table, and the people we love. We shouldn't start everyday with thanksgiving just because it's good for us (even though it is) we should give thanks because it's the right response to all God has done.

- And next, prayer! (Prayer is the right response to gratitude)

Paul's words of thanksgiving lead him to prayer. In v. 9, he writes:

“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.”

(Philippians 1:9-11)

Can you feel the excitement, the sheer joy and love Paul has for these people? He knows the Philippians are under the pump, he knows life is hard for his friends but he's bursting with praise all the same.

Notice how the things he's giving thanks for aren't physical things. He doesn't pray for health or wealth or even the physical safety of these people. He prays that they might grow to know Jesus more, that they might grow in

kindness, and that on the day they meet with Jesus (either when Jesus returns or when they die) that he will find them pure and blameless.

Yes Paul cares about their physical wellbeing. He wants them to be safe and healthy, but he realises that their spiritual wellbeing comes first. These are things that cannot be taken away from the Philippians. They can be slandered publicly, beaten up, their businesses can be destroyed or boycotted, and they can be thrown in jail but these things can't threaten their knowledge of God or their spiritual purity before Christ.

So often in our world today we neglect our spiritual wellbeing to take care of our physical. We focus on our jobs, or our appearance, or our social lives and forget about our spiritual lives. This is because advertisers bombard us day by day telling us to eat more, drink more, work more. Many advertisers need us to be worried so we'll buy their products. Your life will be a mess if you don't buy my revolutionary potato peeler.

Ironically again this makes us anxious and worried people. Neuro-scientists are finding that people who focus on their worries neural pathways or ruts in their brains which make them focus on their worries more. It's good to worry about some things, if there's a wild snake in my house, I need to worry about the snake until it's not in my house. On the other hand if I spend my whole life worrying about politics overseas, what strangers think of me, or the latest conspiracy theory on Facebook I will program myself to be in a constant state of anxiety.

Worry more often than not is a conversation you have with yourself about things you can't change. Prayer is a conversation you have with God about the things he can change.

This is why Paul lifts our sights and encourages us to pray and focus on Jesus. God is bigger than our problems and while following God won't make your problems go away it will bring your problems into perspective and help you grow.

Research coming out of Harvard University by Professor Tyler VanderWeele has found that religious service attendance, what you folks are doing right now is good for you. People who attend religious services regularly on the whole are more likely to report having meaning and happiness in life, they have deeper relationships, lower levels of depression and suicide, they volunteer more and give back to the community, and have better life expectancy and physical health.

For Paul, sitting in jail because of his faith, this is obvious. You can read about Paul's journey in the book of Acts but becoming a Christian lead him into a life of constant rejection, opposition, and suffering. He lived as a wandering preacher, selling tents to pay his bills until he was arrested and needed to rely on his friends and God to survive. But through all this Paul discovered the secret to joy and fulfillment. A heart full of gratitude and praise to God.

Conclusion

So as we begin our new series, let's encourage one another to do the first things. Let's give thanks to God for all he's given us and all he's done for us. Let's fill our hearts with gratitude and see our gratitude erode our anxiety. Let's keep praying for our world and for our church, knowing that as we do so God will complete the work he's already begun in us. Jesus is our anchor in anxiety and he's with us, he's for us, and that's the best news in the world.