

## **Partners in the Gospel**

### **Philippians 1:3-5**

This morning, as we look forward to our missions conference and a great week of getting to know our guests, Tim and Hannah, I want us to take a look at what our role needs to be when it comes to supporting missionaries like them. We have a long history of being a church family that sees the importance of sending and supporting missionaries as they go to the ends of the earth to spread the hope of Jesus to people who have never heard and have no access to the gospel. And that needs to continue. We are sending missionaries to places that are very hard to reach and often dangerous and as God raises up people from our local churches and calls them to go, we need to support them. This morning we're going to look at how to do that well and in a way that is effective.

Last year we enjoyed a week with Mike and Alyssa Brill. Since then, they have decided not to go back. I don't know the details, but in some way the difficulty and struggles of being a missionary was a major factor in their decision. Gary Sandmann was here a few weeks ago and many of you know him personally. If you do, you know how difficult it is for him to do what he does. When people go to the mission field, they often leave their homes and families for many years. They are trying to settle in a foreign culture, learn a new language and new customs. There is often resistance and danger because of what they are doing. There is heightened spiritual warfare. Satan is active and does not want the light of Christ coming to dark places that are part of his stronghold.

It's very hard, and yet, cross-cultural missions is critically important for completing the great commission and Christ continues to call people to go and make disciples. He will continue to call people from our very own church family – some of you. He puts a passion and burden in hearts for going to those places to spread the gospel and we have an important part to play in sending and supporting them. Today we're going to look at what that is.

I want to show you who we are currently supporting as missionaries. These people are our friends and most of them were part of this community...

- Alice Brown – serves right here in Polk County with CEF.
- Rod and Martie Elbaor – Serving in Texas and Mexico with Christian Carpentry Ministry.

- Gary & Minnie Sandmann – Serving in Los Canelos Mexico with Feed My Lambs International.
- Bob and Molly Midgette – Serving in Bordeaux France with the C&MA
- Ralph and Ellen Shepard – Serving in Guadalajara Mexico with TEAM
- Aaron and Sarah Emerson – Serving in Orlando, Florida with CRU

These are our people, following Christ’s call to go. Now, what can we do to support and encourage them? This morning we are going to look at what one church did to support the Apostle Paul in his missionary efforts – the church in Philippi. Paul planted the church there and returned on various occasions, and several years later he wrote a letter to them. Philippians was written to encourage them in their faith. But it wasn’t just Paul who encouraged them, they also encouraged him. They supported him as a missionary and in the book of Philippians, we see 4 things they did that made a huge difference. I want us to learn from what they did and challenge us to do the same things for at least one missionary we know in our lives.

First of all, I want us to see how much it meant to Paul that they were supporting him. He writes about that at the beginning of the letter...

Read Philippians 1:3-5.

*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup> always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

This is just one of many places where Paul expresses his joy and gratitude for the church in Philippi. You can see that he was filled with joy and thankfulness as he thought about and prayed for them. Why did he feel that way? He says in verse 5 – *“because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.”* I looked up the Greek word for partnership and it’s “koinonia,” which means partnership, participation, sharing in, or fellowship. The Philippians had joined together with Paul in the gospel – at first by receiving and believing it, but then by also partnering with him in promoting and spreading it. And he was greatly encouraged by their partnership with him.

What did that partnership look like? As you read through this letter, you come across some statements that Paul makes that show you what their partnership

looked like. The first is in the middle of chapter 1. When Paul was writing this letter, he had been in prison for nearly 5 years. At that time he was under house arrest in Rome, chained to a guard, and awaiting trial before Emperor Nero. His life was in danger. Nero had the power to kill him, so it was a high-pressure situation – would he give up? Would he forsake Christ and cave in? Paul was confident he wouldn't, and he gives a couple reasons in verses 18-20...

Read Philippians 1:18b-20

*Yes, and I will rejoice, <sup>19</sup>for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, <sup>20</sup>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.*

So as Paul waited to stand before Nero, he was confident that whatever happened – whether he lived or died, whether he was tortured or released – he would honor Christ. What gave him such great confidence in the midst of such fearful and uncertain circumstances? He says in verse 19: *“for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.”* He knew that the Christians in Philippi were praying for him and he knew that through their prayers the Spirit of Jesus would give him the help he needed to stand firm. He knew that his faith would not be shaken and that he would honor Christ no matter what happened.

How valuable do you think our prayers are to the missionaries we support? Gary Sandmann faces the possibility of kidnapping and death every day. How valuable do you think our prayers are to him? How valuable do you think our prayers were to Bob and Molly Midgette with the year they just had? They spent weeks in the hospital with a premature baby, then they faced serious illness. Then Bob had to give their baby mouth to mouth resuscitation two different times to keep him alive. Do you think they felt like giving up? Our prayers make a difference. They move the hand of God to bring the help of the Spirit of Jesus, and they bring hope and encouragement when our brothers and sisters know that we're standing with them in spiritual battle.

I encourage you to pray for missionaries. Randy and Mary have a photo album on a stand in their kitchen with missionary pictures in it. Each day they flip to a new picture and remember to pray for that person or family. Maybe you could start

doing something like that. Most missionaries have some kind of prayer letter or email they send out every month and you could get on the list of those missionaries God lays on your heart to stay up to date and keep praying for them. I also encourage you to connect personally and regularly with at least one missionary. I started emailing Bob Midgette a few years ago and it has been a great way to stay in touch for encouragement both ways. Prayer makes a difference. Your prayers make a difference. They move the hand of God and lift up those who know you're praying for them.

Another way the Philippians partnered with Paul can be seen in chapter 2...

Read Philippians 2:19-24.

*<sup>19</sup> I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. <sup>20</sup> For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. <sup>21</sup> For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup> But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. <sup>23</sup> I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, <sup>24</sup> and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.*

These verses show us the importance of hosting missionaries and how encouraging that is. The Philippians had hosted Paul several times. We see here he was going to send Timothy to them and that he himself was planning to come. Those times together can be a great encouragement for everyone. By actually hosting a missionary in our church or in our homes we are able to form personal bonds of friendship that can lead to ongoing encouragement in many ways. That's how my friendship with Bob Midgette started. When he was here for our Fall Conference a few years ago, he stayed in our house and we were able to spend more time together. He was able to open up more than in a public setting and let us know more personal issues they were facing and how we could pray for them. By hosting a missionary you see that they are a very real person just like you and me and you can actually become friends with them.

This week you have the opportunity to host Tim and Hannah for a meal in your home. I encourage you to take advantage of that. Look at it as a time to bless them, get to know them, and show the love of Christ. If the Lord so moves, it may

lead to an ongoing friendship, or at least make it more personal if you sign up and receive a prayer letter from them.

We are also hosting Tim and Hannah in general as a church by having them speak at different events. I want to encourage you to try to make it out for some of the conference events. All the details are in the bulletin and newsletter. It's easy to get busy doing our own thing and skip events without much thought, but we have a unique opportunity for just a few days to pour out love, encouragement, and support to our battle-weary brother and sister in Christ. Let's overwhelm them with blessing as they spend this week with us.

The third way the Philippians partnered with Paul shows up in the next few verses...

Philippians 2:25-30

*<sup>25</sup> I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, <sup>26</sup> for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. <sup>27</sup> Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. <sup>28</sup> I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. <sup>29</sup> So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, <sup>30</sup> for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.*

Epaphroditus was actually from Philippi and was sent by them on a short-term missions trip to minister to the apostle Paul. He describes him in verse 25: "your messenger and minister to my need." They sent Epaphroditus to him, to minister to him in prison. So what I'm seeing here is similar to what we do when we send people on short-term missions trips. It took a lot longer back then because of transportation limitations, but the purpose was similar. They sent Epaphroditus to help Paul and minister to his needs. And you can see it was profoundly life-giving to Paul. He was blessed immensely by Epaphroditus and they formed a deep bond of brotherly love.

One of the things we can do to support missionaries is to send short-term mission teams to go and do strategic ministry to assist and encourage them. It needs to be

done well so we end up being a blessing and not just an added stress, but I think we do that well. Most years we have the opportunity for you to either go on a trip or support those who do by helping with the costs and praying for them. I met with Gary a few weeks ago and he told me how wonderful it was when our guys went down there to help with the children's home – hundreds of hours of work that is just done and Gary doesn't have to do. Short-term missions trips, if done well, can be a huge encouragement for the missionaries we support.

The fourth and final way the Philippians partnered with Paul can be found in chapter 4...

Philippians 4:15-20

*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. <sup>16</sup> Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. <sup>17</sup> Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. <sup>18</sup> I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup> And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. <sup>20</sup> To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

Paul was deeply blessed by the financial support he received from the Philippian church on multiple occasions. The money that was given freed up Paul to be able to engage in more ministry and there was spiritual fruit – a spiritual harvest. You can see in verse 17 that the gift they gave resulted in fruit that was to their credit. When we give financial support to missionaries, it frees them up to do ministry, and the fruit that comes from that ministry is linked directly to us. You may not be called to go to a foreign place to preach the gospel, but when you support those who are, you play a vital role in expanding Christ's kingdom.

Are you giving financial support to any missionaries? I highly encourage you to start giving to the missionaries God lays on your heart. You may not think you have enough to give, but even if it's only a small amount, it makes a significant difference. It's more about the heart than the amount. By giving a gift of any amount it connects you with the ministry and the fruit of the missionary you're supporting.

There are many ways to give. It might be a one-time donation or a love-offering for a special need. We will have the opportunity to do that this coming week with Tim and Hannah. Or it might be recurring monthly gifts. I highly encourage you to start doing that. One-time gifts are a blessing, but monthly support is the way that most missionaries are funded for the long-haul. You can give to the Great Commission Fund through the faith promise cards in the pews. Please prayerfully consider doing that. Also, every missionary we support has a safe and trustworthy way you can give and I encourage you to get started today.

All of these things were a tremendous support and encouragement to the apostle Paul: the prayers of the Philippians, their hospitality, their short-term mission teams, and their financial assistance. These are the same ways we can support missionaries today, AND THEY NEED IT. The mission field is uniquely difficult and we need to do our part at being a church that partners in the gospel.

One of the most famous missionaries was a man named William Carey who spent decades doing mission work among the Hindus in India. It was a dark and dangerous work and before he went out he told his friend, Andrew Fuller: *"I will go down into the pit, if you will hold the ropes."* Let's look at these pictures again:

- Alice Brown
- Rod and Martie Elbaor
- Gary & Minnie Sandmann
- Bob and Molly Midgette
- Ralph and Ellen Shepard
- Aaron and Sarah Emerson

They are going into the pit – now, will we be the ones who hold their ropes?