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2001 Missions Conference: Join Hands to Reach the World

Partnership in the Gospel

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Please take your Bibles and turn to Philippians chapter 1. I want to thank you for the invitation to come and be with you for these days. I've enjoyed very much being in the city of Lincoln. I was here 8-10 years ago very briefly, out by the airport, and that's all I knew about your city. I may have stopped in a coffee shop jumping off of I-80 going to Colorado or something like that, but I'd never really been here before.

I've enjoyed it immensely. I was able to meet with some of our retirees and former members who live in the area. We had lunch yesterday and that was excellent. Then I did come early. I was here Thursday evening and all day Friday, interacting with some of your university students and young adults. I will tell you, you have a treasure there. I would encourage you in all your support of that ministry. It was a pleasure to meet with these young people and sense their heart and passion for missions, and I hope that I was able to encourage them.

I also spent some time with Brian and Kathy Edwards: new missionaries with SEND, old staff members with you. Tomorrow morning they leave on a survey trip to Europe. They'll be going to Germany and then to Bulgaria in order to ascertain out of the several places they could serve, which place they should serve. Be praying with them as they go and as they look at the opportunities. They're going to be involved in theological education, the training of national leadership, and we want God's will for them in this. So pray for them as they go. They won't be gone long; they'll be back with you soon. And I'm sure that they will be able to report to you on the results of that trip.

"Join Hands Around the World"--what a great missionary theme, what a great conference theme to have. It really is true. Now you're not the first ones to think about partnering or partnership. It's a rather old idea. Actually, there was a fellow named Adam who needed a partner. He looked through all the animals for one that was suitable, giving them names, and so forth. And he never found one. So God had to take a rib from his side and create a partner. That's found very early in the Book. So God has thought that we ought to be doing things together for a long, long time.

David, before he was king, was engaged in some battles. On one particular occasion, there were some men who had stayed with the supplies while others had gone on to engage in the front-line battle. There was some conversation afterwards by those who had gone down and done the fighting. They thought they ought to receive a greater share of the loot and booty that had been taken in the battle. David was very clear that those who stayed with the supplies, those who stayed with the stuff, generated or gathered an equal portion with those who had actually gone down to the battle. Teaming is a very, very old concept, and a very biblical concept.

Indeed, we have before you a letter from a missionary back to one of his sending churches. How many of you receive letters from missionaries (get prayer letters at home)? Good. I hope you read those and you pray over them. How many of you get e-mail correspondence from missionaries? In case you don't, Lincoln Berean Church produces a set

of missionary prayer requests each and every month, a distillation of the letters, and you have opportunity to connect that way and to pray. And I want to encourage you today to grow in that practice.

Paul tells us that we are partners together in the Gospel. Listen to the Word of the Lord: "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. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains [*jail*] or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share [*the same word that was used before: partner*] in God's grace with me" (Philippians 1:3-7).

We are, in fact, partners in the Gospel with those who serve at great distances. This is not really a 50/50 partnership that is described here. It's much more interwoven than that. It isn't that you do this and I do that. It's much more a "best friends" situation: talking together, knowing one another, anticipating one another, thinking the same thoughts together. We are able to do this because we are one in Christ. We have been adopted into His Body. We are members of the same family. We have been filled with the very same Holy Spirit of God to energize us for every good work and the work of evangelism.

We certainly are to partner with those who are pressing out the boundaries of the church, for they are at risk and they have a special ministry. And we need to uphold them. We need to uphold them in a number of ways, but Paul suggests three ways in which we might act as partners in the Gospel.

First, in verse 7 here, we are partners in God's *grace*. The text says, "For whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share [*partner*] in God's grace with me." The word "share" is *koinonia*, or a form of it. It's used several places in the text. I'm sure you've heard sermons on this word before. It means "fellowship" or "communion" or "offering" or "community" or "joint participation." It's a very intimate word, and it says "in this way, at this level, we share in God's grace."

Now there's just one kind of grace. That's the grace that comes to a person who is a sinner: cleanses them, identifies them with Jesus Christ. It is that "good work" mentioned in verse 6 that has begun and will continue. Salvation is this very good news, this grace. Whether our missionaries, or those at the edge, find themselves imprisoned or in whatever circumstance, we share in the grace that they are sharing with others.

So sometimes Paul says here that he defends that Gospel: he declares with his lips exactly what it is--that Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, was born into this world, that He lived a perfect and sinless life, that He died on the cross for your sins and for mine as a substitutionary atonement, that He was buried, that He rose again on the third day, and that if by faith you will accept and receive His grace, you will have indeed that life-giving resurrection power, beginning now and going with us through all eternity. That is the message that Paul is preaching.

As a matter of fact, that is the very best news that I can share with you today. I want to encourage you to partner in global missions. But beyond that--much more important than that--is that you would become a part of God's forever family, that *you* would receive this

good news. And if you are here today and do not live by faith in Jesus Christ, if you have not received His free gift of salvation, then that is what I want you to do. Then we can talk about partnering or other things, but that is indeed the very good news for you.

As the Gospel is shared, you share in that grace. I want to read some prayer letters to you today (similar to the ones, I hope, that you're getting and reading). The first one comes from one of our missionaries from Canada, and he has a heart for the Chinese. He served some in China, and then because of some e-mail correspondence that he was engaged in with the mainland, the government there invited him not to return. So he is now reaching out to Chinese who are in Russia. Remember that the border of China and the border of Russia are contiguous in many places, and the Chinese come across for a variety of reasons. He writes:

"It is already a week since we arrived home safe and sound. We weren't on the airplane that crashed in Irkutsk, so probably our work here is not yet done. We flew safely on that day. Vincent Lee and Joe Yang from Canada, and Stephen Lee from Hong Kong, worked very hard teaching during each day and preaching each night at packed meetings. They returned home feeling like a sponge that had been squeezed dry. Rejoice with us [*may I add, share in the grace with us*] over the 30 new decisions and 17 believers who followed Jesus in baptism in cold rivers, and over 20 hours of Bible school that was provided each week to between 10 and 15 students, some of whom had come to Russia just for that very purpose. Your prayers guided us through each thrilling day. What a pleasure it is to serve God."

When you receive a letter like that, you need to remember that you are indeed sharing in that grace that was poured out on those Chinese new believers--30 of them, 17 who were baptized during that one event. You share in that very grace.

Beyond that, Paul says we not only share, or partner, in the grace that is given to us, but we partner in our *affections*, or in the joys that God gives to us. "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship [*same word: partnership, communion, koinonia*] with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Philippians 2:1,2).

Note the words here that speak of partnership: we are united in Christ; we have the fellowship of the Holy Spirit; we are to be like-minded; we are to be one in spirit. In other words, we are to be working together in this. We are to be experiencing the same joy and the same values, the same affections.

We are to be like synchronized clocks that all ring the hour at the same time. We are to be like that famous flying group, the Blue Angels, that fly at super fast speeds, wingtip to wingtip, and move as one body even though they are in separate planes. We need to be like a well-drilled football team that acts together--you know, pick your color or whatever you like. That's the idea that is behind this. We are to be like-minded and we are to partner in the same affections as those who serve at distances.

Paul asked that we might make his joy complete, that we might make the joy of our missionaries complete. You have an important role in this. The truth is that missions, the missionary enterprise, would not even exist except for strong local churches like this, if there were not elders saying, "This will be part of our church. Our church will be committed to the preaching of the Word of God, to the teaching of the Word of God, to raising up a righteous

generation." If pastors would not be true to the Word of God, if people would not follow the Word of God in obedience--then the missionary enterprise is finished.

It is key. If you do not grow and become and stay and remain a healthy congregation, the joy of your missionaries, the joy of missions, will not be realized. After all, who will go for us? Who will go if it isn't those of you who are here, if it isn't those that you are raising up, that you are training, that you are instructing in the Word of God, that you are developing in leadership?

Without that, there is nothing. There is no future. There will be no one pushing back the darkness. And we need that done. We have seen these dark days. We have seen evil full board, and there need to be those who take the candle and the light of righteousness and declare it and say, "No more! We will say the Word of Truth against the word of evil and the word of sin." And we will do that.

You need to know what would make your missionaries' joy complete. It's not just the generalizations that I have talked about, but particular attention, perhaps even small things that would be an encouragement to make their joy complete. I would say if you give your missionaries just a little knowledgeable, helpful attention, they would be encouraged. I know many of you are doing that, but I'd like to encourage all of you to do that.

You need to find out what is happening with them. You need to actually read the letters that they send. You need to actually pray together with your family about those things. Then when they come home on home service, you need to ask them about those things. You need to perhaps surprise them with some act of kindness, something like that.

It's hard for us to do that, harder than you would think, because most of us like to talk about what *we* like to talk about. In most of our conversations, we're not too good at drawing out what *they* like to talk about. Now husbands and wives might want to talk about this to see if it's the real truth, but I think it is.

So often a missionary will come home and it goes like this: I come home and someone in my church comes up to me and says, "Dave, Dave Wood, you've been gone a long time. How did that last trip go?" And I say, "It really went great. Let me tell you about the people at Lincoln Berean Church." Then that person changes the subject--brings up the football team, the weather, the crops, whatever it is--because they're much more comfortable in talking about what they like to talk about (in my town, that's typically automotive stuff). We just don't know what that other person would say, and we're more comfortable talking about what we talk about, and we might even be a little convicted if we hear what they talk about--so we just kind of pass on it.

Missionaries have stories to tell; missionaries have news to share; missionaries have an insight on the world. You need to encourage them to be able to share that truth with you. And you do that just by listening and asking them about it.

You would encourage and make their joy complete if you would be involved in the same kinds of things that they are doing. Do you have missionaries that are teaching English? You know, there are people in Lincoln that need to learn English. There are university students that need to improve their English skills because they're from a foreign country. You

would know and understand and fulfill the joy of your missionaries if you would teach them English, or if you would teach them and encourage them in their reading skills.

Missionaries are involved in Christian education: in growing people up in the Lord, in teaching the Bible. As you engage in these things--as you engage in your Christian education program, as you teach Sunday school to kindergartners and junior highers and adults--you indeed are fulfilling the joy of your missionary family. Then when they return, you'll be able to ask them questions that will let them know that you are paying attention and that you are praying with them.

Let me read a second letter. This letter is written by a missionary who works in an Islamic situation. This is his first term, and so he has been kind of hanging out and making friends near a university. The head of the mosque has noticed that he's in town and has really commissioned a couple of guys, a couple of university students who attend the mosque, to hang out around this missionary and find out what he's about--because he's not calling himself a missionary; he says he's there to help and mentor students. He's doing that, but he's also making friends for the Gospel. As you might guess, the Word of God in these Bible studies takes root in these students who've been sent there by the leader of the mosque. So the spies who went in are intrigued by the Gospel. Here's the letter:

"Our recent prayer letter left off with Abdul, a Muslim student on the threshold of faith, wanting to follow what he knew to be true, yet troubled by the cost. Like catching a hen, he was cautious about moving too fast. Just days before I left the field, Abdul gave his life to Jesus. A few weeks later, Akeem, another student in the Bible study with us, dreamt of Jesus claiming to be God. Akeem awoke and at once left Islam and chose to follow Jesus. In this past month, Sam and Hadeem, two other male students in the Bible study with our team, have stepped out in faith and now are brothers in the faith."

Craig was just coming on home service. I tell you that it would fulfill his joy if someone would come up to him and say, "Tell me about Abdul. Tell me about Hadeem. Are they going on in the faith? Are they facing persecution? How can we pray for them with you?" You would fulfill his joy indeed. And you can do that with your missionaries right here.

Now there's one final way that Paul calls on us to identify and partner, and that's in the area of *suffering*. I wouldn't bring this up if it weren't in the text. I don't want to suggest that missionaries are more heroic or do more sympathy than anybody else who suffers. But Paul tells us here that he rejoices that this church has partnered when he was in trouble.

Paul says, inspired by the Holy Spirit, "Yet it was good of you to share [*that's the same koinonia word: partner*] in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account" (Philippians 4:14-17).

The truth is, as we partner with our missionaries at the point of their suffering, we somehow share in the work that they do, and then the benefit of it somehow comes to us. It is

credited to our account. Now I don't know how God does that. But I know that Paul said that.

We need to understand what missionary life is like. These people live out at the edge. They live in high-risk, stressful situations. So at that distance, with that kind of pressure, they may be prone to loneliness. Many missionaries fight depression. They miss the things that make up normal life, and these things are losses to them and they have to handle that. It isn't that any one thing is such an awful thing, but together they make up a load. So they're not able to attend their niece's or nephew's birthday. They're not able to go to that graduation event. They're not there for their own birthdays or for the family Christmas celebration. They're not there when their grandmother passes away. These events are all missed for them.

There are certain things that they are used to. In the fall of the year, they're used to that great Saturday afternoon event just like you are. In the spring of the year, they're looking for the leaves to come on the trees (and they may be living in the desert). We have some missionaries from Kansas who live in Japan. There's nothing very similar between those two geographic areas: one is mountainous and full of tall buildings; one is flat. Have you ever seen a sunrise or sunset? I think they probably get them here in Nebraska, too; it's kind of flat. I remember being in Kansas and the sun popped up, and there was this long line, 180 degrees, one tree, one house. If you see that every morning all your life and then you don't see it *ever*, because in Japan it rains half the time, it's mountainous, there's no horizon, and when the sun rises, if you're up, it kind of gloomily peaks out between the buildings in kind of a wet sky. Just all of that together is a part of what they miss because they are at a distance.

Missionaries are exposed to disease more readily. Our missionaries who come home from the Philippines test positive for TB. Those missionaries who serve in Africa are much more likely to engage, and *will* engage, with those who are HIV positive and have AIDS and will suffer with the tremendous pain of loss of family life. I wasn't off the plane ten minutes visiting a friend in Uganda until he was introducing me to people who had lost parents or brothers and sisters because of this dreaded disease--and that situation is there.

There are missionaries who live in the midst of political instability. You have seen the news with regard to Afghanistan. Every mission agency I know has withdrawn their missionaries from Pakistan. Your missionaries Randy and Cathy live in Macedonia, and that's been a stressful and rather a politically intense place. When you have to live with the idea that you need to be prepared to leave at any time, you need to be prepared to evacuate--that's a high stress situation. You are nervous just about doing the things of life.

So we need to come alongside. We need to suffer with them. We need to help them pay the real cost. That means we need to support them financially. You do that corporately, and it's wonderful that you do. You also need to engage in that in personal ways so that you know what's going on. I encourage you, the first of the month or the first of the week, however your cash comes in, give away as much money as you can. That is the most fun you're going to have with your money. Everything else you spend your money on, you either consume (you know, like the gas bill) or it wears out (like clothes and stuff like that) or it's something real expensive (like a car, and you have to buy insurance for it and spend a lot of money on maintenance for it, and it's finally going to get old and the people in my city are going to make money selling you a new one). That's what you do with the rest of your money.

I would encourage you to enjoy giving money away to Christian causes in a variety of ways and support your church with an abandonment there. You need to support missionaries who may have medical issues and come home with those issues and are going to need some special help. You need to support missionaries in an emotional way.

You need to correspond with them in a way that's encouraging. You've got a great opportunity right out here with this video camera, an opportunity to say howdy to people--you ought to do that. You ought to stand in front of that camera and say, "Hi, I'm Dave Wood, and I'm new here at Berean Church. I want you to know that I'm praying for you. Here's my kid, Diane, and she has memorized a verse of Scripture to encourage you. And here's my kid Nathan, and he's going to sing you a little song." I'm telling you, that would encourage them. That would buoy their experience. That would encourage them in a very positive way. It's all set up, so do it!

You need to give them strategic support. You need to be a part of one of those teams that goes and helps. You need to make sure that that well drilling project takes place--so that the strategic thing, the important thing, gets done.

You need to help them spiritually because spiritual warfare is one of the things that is faced much more by missionaries than we perceive it going on--because they are intentionally taking back enemy ground. So you need to pray. You need to labor in prayer for them, and it's called labor because it's hard work. I can't imagine any harder work than prayer. It takes a lot of concentration. Have you noticed when you start to pray, how other things come to your mind? Oh, you forgot to take the meat out of the freezer, or you forgot to get the maintenance done on the car, or you have this assignment coming in, or you have a great idea for that term paper. It seems to happen and distractions come--the telephone rings, or whatever, any excuse--and we set that aside. I encourage you to be diligent.

All of this brings joy to the missionary and to you. And as it does, it's credited to you. The Scripture says so. So as people come to Christ, as these Muslim converts came to Christ --that is credited to you. As new believers grow in grace, as those who suffer from alcoholism or homelessness are changed by the Holy Spirit of God and families are renewed, that is credited to you. As mature believers are trained and become part of the national church leadership, that accrues to you. As churches are established and as new outreaches are launched, that is all to your credit--because you are partnering together with those who are afar and at a distance.

Let me encourage you in every way. Be a partner. Join hands to reach around the world. Be the partner that God wants you to be. What is He telling you right now? Are you rejoicing in the grace of God as you share in that? Do you participate in the affections and joys of your missionaries? Do you come alongside them in their suffering and in their need? Reach out as God directs you and join hands around the world for the sake of Jesus Christ, for the cause of the Gospel, for that one message that has eternal value: people can receive and live forever. It is with great rejoicing that you do it.