

How should a Reformed, Calvinist, Presbyterian Church feel?

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[0 : 0 0] So as you can see on the screen and as I hope you all realise today is New Year's Day and it's wonderful to start a new year together and it's always a time for us to reflect on New Year's Day, it's a time to look back, you see many things that have happened in the year that's gone by, many things that have gone well and maybe things that haven't gone so well, maybe things that have been really difficult but it's also an opportunity to look forward. We think about all that this might, that this year might bring, we think about the opportunities that it will bring for us and all of that makes this a good time to think about how we feel and I love the week between Christmas and New Year because it's a week when everybody seems, it's the one week of the year when everybody seems to slow down and it's a good time to think, to reset, to plan ahead and as you do that it's good to ask yourself the question how are you feeling and I'm sure you're feeling lots of things, I hope that you feel refreshed, I hope this week has been just a nice enjoyable week for you, maybe it went by too quickly and you still feel quite weary, maybe as you look ahead to the coming year you feel a sense of anticipation but maybe you also feel anxious, maybe you feel very content and thankful and maybe there's other things that are giving you sadness and you're probably a mixture of all of these things. Today I want us to think a little bit more about how we are feeling and I want to ask the question that I'm sure you ask yourself every day, how should a reformed Calvinist Presbyterian church feel on New Year's Day? One of the reasons we need to ask that question is because that's what we are, we are all three of these things, we are reformed in the sense that we look back to the Reformation that took place 500 years ago as a key event in world history, a key event in church history, not because the Reformation invented new things but actually because the Reformation pointed the church back to what the Bible taught. We are a Calvinist church and John Calvin was one of the most prominent reformers and we believe that the summary that he and his successors gives of the Christian faith and of the theology in the Bible, we believe that that summary is accurate and so Calvin and many others in the church have been used by God to help explain many of the ways in which the Bible fits together and so we value that greatly. We are Presbyterian in that we believe that a local church is led by a group of Presbyters but we tend to refer to them as elders rather than presbyters which means exactly the same thing and so rather than a church being led by an individual it's led by a collective group of elders and that group of elders in the group of elders over each individual congregation doesn't function in isolation as churches we are connected to other churches all across our island and our nation and so that local church serves alongside other churches in other parts of the nation we're connected together and we support one another and so we are a reformed

Calvinist Presbyterian church so the church of Scotland beside us were exactly the same in both of these in all three of these ways. So a question you need to ask is how should a reformed Calvinist Presbyterian church feel? First response to that question is to say well do they actually have feelings? Maybe you think well maybe we should feel maybe your instinctive answer is that a church like that tends to feel miserable and I think that stereotype is there among people outside us and there are ways in which our tradition has I think given off not intentionally but has given off an impression that there's a focus on the negative. Maybe we should feel serious and again I think there's a sense in which the answer to that is yes because what we believe and what we do is incredibly important and ultimately as we come to look at God's word each week we are thinking about the issues of life and death of time and eternity and there's nothing more serious or important than that and God forbid that we are ever flippant or casual about these things maybe we should feel happy and the answer to that is yes there is so much to be happy about the gospel is good news and it brings amazing joy and so many of you know the reality of that in your own experience but there is a really important sense in which we recognize that there are also many reasons for us to lament and so we don't start a new year's day saying we should feel nothing but happy because we recognize that there are so many things that cause us to grieve we see suffering and injustice and sorrow all across the world and in the lives of people in our community as well and all of that should grieve us and so all of these emotions are important to have in their right place but I want to suggest today that there's one emotion that should stand out for us on New

Year's Day and I'm tempted to say that this is the one emotion that I think should define a reformed Calvinist Presbyterian church more than any other but it's also an emotion that we don't tend to associate with a church of this kind so what is it what should we be feeling well on New Year's Day a reformed Calvinist Presbyterian church should be feeling excited and I want to prove this to you today and the reason I've chosen that is because if we understand and believe our theology then as we look ahead into 2024 we will be very very excited and all of this is captured magnificently in a sentence that Neil read for us in Philippians 1 it's verse 6 where Paul writes I'm sure of this that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ this is a wonderful sentence and it's a very typical New

Testament sentence because the language is very simple it's quite a basic statement yet within that there is so there's a wealth of amazing theology it's so full of teaching that is mind-blowing and I want to unpack that a wee bit together this morning I want to look at five key truths that this sentence reveals five key truths that should fill us with excitement for the year ahead number one God is sovereign that's one of the most important truths of reformed theology the fact that God is sovereign he he is almighty he is all powerful he reigns over everything and when it comes to our salvation he does everything that is needed and that's one of the key truths that distinguishes the Christian gospel from the other religious systems in the world because the vast majority of religious systems across the world are variations on the theme that says be good and you will be saved work hard and God will accept you try your best and everything will be fine that is the the religious systems all across the world are variations on that same theme the emphasis is on us

[8 : 22] God is up there and we have to work our way up towards him and even some sections of the Christian church preach the same thing reformed theology says no and the reason we say no to that kind of thinking is because the Bible says no to that and Paul was one of the ones who expressed that so clearly a great example as in Ephesians 2 8 where he says it's by grace you've been saved through faith it's not your own doing it's the gift of God it's not a result of works so that no one may boast and it's so important to keep coming back to this to remember this again and again because that message be good and you will be saved it is actually an offensive message it's offensive because it shuns any sense of dependence on God because it's saying to God we can do it we don't actually need you and it's offensive because it offers no hope to the weak because the truth is none of us can do it and all of us make mistakes and a message that says well you've got to get yourself good enough for God offers no hope to the person who's weak and so that's why we do not preach a message of salvation by works we preach a message of salvation by grace that means that salvation is a gift that we receive it is not a qualification that we earn and that means that in every single aspect of our salvation we are completely and totally dependent on God and and verse 6 of Philippians 1 captures that so so beautifully because the starter who begins the work and the worker who continues the work and the completer who perfects the work is all God from the start to the beginning to the conclusion it is all God's doing and that's why you can sum up the reformed theology of salvation in four words God does it all

God desires and plans for your salvation he accomplishes it through the work of God the Son Jesus Christ he applies all that Jesus has accomplished to us through the work of God the Holy Spirit when it comes to saving people God does it all and that should fill us with excitement because he's not stopped he has not stopped doing that and as we look ahead to the coming year we can be so conscious of our limitations and our weaknesses and reform theology tells you that that does not matter because God does it all he has been doing it across all the generations of history he's doing it across all the nations of the world and nowhere does he say I'm gonna stop on January the 1st 2024 he is not stopping and that should fill us with excitement for the year ahead key truth number two is that becoming a Christian is not the finish line it's the start of something amazing verse 6 captures this so well it speaks about the beginning of something that is now continuing on through the work of God for these Philippians and for every other Christian coming to faith in Jesus is just the start it's just the start of something brilliant and that's so so important to remember because it's so easy to forget we can often put such an emphasis on conversion on coming to faith in Jesus and and that's a good thing we should do that because there's nothing more important than putting your trust in Jesus but sometimes our emphasis on conversion is so strong that we think it's the finish line that that's that's the destination that you've got to reach and sometimes we think that it has to be a spectacular finish line so you imagine like a big marathon where they're coming to the finish line and the crowd's huge or the 18th hole at the open when the biggest crowd is there in the finish line is what really matters and for some people that's what their conversion story is it is something very dramatic and we often hear stories of dramatic conversions and they simultaneously amaze us and grieve us they amaze us because we think wow look what God did and it grieves us because we think it wasn't like that for me and they've got something that I don't have and that lack of a remarkable conversion can leave many professing

Christians feeling inadequate or insecure and it can leave so many people who are genuine believers who have a childlike faith in Jesus and and and much more than a childlike faith and yet they think that they're not yet saved because they're waiting for something spectacular to happen before they can be sure and all of that comes from thinking that conversion is the finish line but it's not this version the whole of the New Testament is telling us that it's just the start and very often the start of something amazing can be quite unspectacular and so a good a good illustration to compare this to is falling in love so the movies like to make it look as though falling in love has a spectacular start you know two people they rose pet they see each other across the room like quite doves start to flutter out from all places rose petals fall from the sky and it's also spectacular but falling in love is rarely like that so one of the first places that you know and I met was the swimming pool so you can imagine what happened I walk in tall tanned toned he knows like wow that's the movie version the true version was it was swimming lessons I was about seven years old my hair would have been cut by my mother I'd have had a wee pot belly and I was probably crying if not close to crying because I was terrified of Keith Dodson everyone my age knows exactly what I'm talking about for those of you who don't know Keith Dodson scary swimming instructor who used to spray you with water and the key point is that the beginning is not what matters and today I am not interested in you know saying oh wasn't it amazing when we met because all that matters is that as I wake up every day she's still by my side and God's not interested in you waking up every day saying oh remember that day Lord when something amazing happened whenever no that's not relevant what matters is that we wake up every day saying Lord I want to follow you today and for the rest of my life exactly the same applies to us applies to all of us in our journey as followers of Jesus the start is just the start and from that point God is helping us to grow and to learn and to deepen in our love for him and for one another and that's one of the key teachings that John Calvin gave us

John Calvin spoke and wrote about what's known as double grace and he wrote it originally in Latin and so it often gets referred to as duplex gratia now don't worry if that sounds complicated it's not complicated at all basically what he was saying was that he said we're saved by grace so when we come to faith in Jesus that is by the grace of God it is his gift it's all because of what he has done but he says that's only half of the story that's only half of God's grace there's a double grace because it's not just a conversion that is through the grace of God our whole lives as Christians is also completely dependent on God's grace in other words God saves us and then he leads us and looks after us and builds us up and shapes us day by day more and more into the people that he wants us to be the big theological word for that is sanctification and it's exactly what Paul prays for these Philippians in this chapter he's praised that their love would have bound more and more with all knowledge and discern with knowledge and all discernment so that they might approve what's excellent so they might be pure and blameless for the day of

Christ filled with a fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God and so by God's grace we are all growing in faith our conversion was just the start of God's work of grace in their lives from that point on he is helping us to grow and mature and to become more and more like Jesus and God has promised to do that and he's not going to break that promise and it's not dependent on how well you feel you're doing it's all dependent on his grace and that makes this year so exciting for us as followers of Jesus because God wants you to grow this year and this is a year when God will keep working in you a year where by the end of it you will have experience and maturity and wisdom that you don't have right now it's a year whereby the ongoing grace of God your love will abound more and more your knowledge and discernment will increase your sense of right and wrong will sharpen you'll be able to approve more and more what is excellent you'll be better prepared for that day when Jesus will return and the fruit of righteousness will grow more and more in your life that's what God wants for you is that not exciting it is so exciting key through number three is that everything that happens now has purpose and potential in verse six Paul is saying that God is doing a good work in you that's reminding us that every

[19 : 23] Christian is a channel through which God can do amazing things and that's so important for us to remember because again it's really easy to misunderstand when we emphasize that God is sovereign which is a key part of our Reformed Calvinist theology when we emphasize that God is sovereign and all-powerful it's so easy for people to fall into the trap of thinking well there's a reason for us to do nothing and I've often heard people speak in that way they think well God's sovereign what can we do and it almost makes us just think we sit back and watch God it can leave us very passive as Christians it can leave us very detached and at times it can even leave us very lazy and it's all a complete misunderstanding of God's sovereignty it's easy to think God is sovereign therefore we are ornaments on his shelves it's like we're just sitting there while we watch him do all the work because he's sovereign he does it all we contribute nothing but that's not what the Bible teaches the Bible does not teach us teach that we are ornaments on his shelves the Bible teaches us that we are instruments in his hands and the fact that he is sovereign almighty and active doesn't mean that we can do nothing it's the basis on which we do anything and you don't need to think about this for long to realize that it's true because geniuses don't have ornaments they have instruments BB King didn't leave his guitar hanging on a shelf he picked it up put it into his hands and played the best blues that's that we've heard in the last 50 years

JK Rowling didn't think I'm gonna have a collection of stationery in my house that I'll just admire pens and paper that I just will collect no she grabbed the pens the paper and she wrote the Harry Potter series as Christians we serve and work and so and reach out because we know that God has promised to do a good work in us and through us and the only reason we can accomplish anything is because we're instruments in his hands Paul knew that Paul was a brilliant theologian he knew better than anybody how weak he really was and yet at the end of this letter he's the one who can say I can do all things through him who strengthens me and that means that the God who is sovereign and all powerful can work through you as well this year you are an instrument in his hands and that makes this year so exciting because yes it's full of uncertainty about work about uni about school about relationships about retirement about family about health there's so many things that we don't know but there's one thing that's absolutely certain God can and will work through all of these circumstances to accomplish his purposes and to continue his good work that means that everything that we do everything that happens in the year ahead has purpose and it has amazing potential and the crucial point that Ephesians that

Philippians 1 reveals is that that is true even when things go wrong it's true even when we are suffering because Paul wrote all of this while he was in prison after all his plans had turned upside down and it looked as though his ministry was going to be severely hampered and he says I want you to know that what's happened to me is actually served to advance the gospel and you've got that beautiful explanation of how his imprisonment has just furthered rather than hindered the work of the gospel that doesn't mean that suffering is easy it doesn't mean that prison was pleasant for Paul but it does mean that if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian suffering is never pointless it's never worthless it is a channel through which God can continue his amazing work the fourth key truth I want to highlight is that the future is amazing one of the fascinating things about Paul's letter is that you can

Paul's letters is that you can never go very far without him talking about the future in everything he writes his perspective on the day-to-day circumstances of the churches that he's writing to and of his own circumstances are always shaped by the reality of the fact that Jesus is going to return and he is constantly reminding us that every day that we live now should be shaped by the realities of that day the day when Jesus returns and we are ushered into eternity and you see exactly that in verse 6 he's talking about the day of Jesus Christ the day when Jesus will return that's the day when God's purposes are going to be brought to completion we live in an era in redemptive history in the history of God's plan of salvation known often known as the already not yet period where lots of things have already happened Jesus has come the church is being built the gospel is being communicated but there's a lot that's not yet happened and we look ahead to the full consummation of God's purposes in the future now we are in the era where God has sent us out with a gospel message and people are called to respond and for those who do respond to Jesus the day when he returns will be a day of completion it'll be the day when everything finally makes sense it'll be the day when questions are answered mysteries are revealed knots are untied tears are wiped away it'll be the day when the sorrow tension and fear of life that we so often experience is replaced with peace and security and joy and this is where we get such a powerful contrast between the person who trusts in Jesus and the person who rejects Jesus because to trust in Jesus places you on a path towards a future where everything will be complete to reject

Jesus places you on a path to a future of emptiness and one of the reasons we know that that is true is because the people who are on that path right now spend their whole lives trying to mask that emptiness and that's what drives the behavior of the society alternatives complete us you certainly drives our own behavior as well and yet we know that none of the alternatives complete us you see that in the lives of others we see it in their own experience none of the alternatives to following Jesus will complete us and even more importantly to recognize that none of the alternatives to Jesus will come with us on the day that we die and yet in him we have we just have this amazing promise of peace and security and joy and we get so many foretaste of that now but you have to remember that every moment of joy and peace and hope every mountaintop experience that you have right now of knowing Jesus it's incomplete it's not nearly as good as it's going to be because the fullness of it all the completion will come on that day when Jesus takes us home and and this is where you see such an amazing sense of perspective in Paul because it's reminding us that for everyone who trusts in Jesus the future is amazing and that's why Paul can think about his own life and he can say for me to live as

[27 : 37] Christ but to die is gain and for him to say actually when I think about my life my desire is to depart and be with Christ because that is far far better that means that if you are a Christian or if you become one it's not just 2024 you should be excited about you've got the whole of eternity to be so excited about so we're seen from this verse that God is sovereign that conversions just the start is not the finish that everything has potential has purpose and potential we're seeing that the future is amazing and last of all we are seeing that we are in this together Philippians 1:6 is one of these verses that is very easy to read in quite an individualistic way we think you know okay God's begun a good work in me and he'll bring it to completion and we can very easily read that verse and it's we just think of it very much in terms of ourselves as individuals and that's okay it's not wrong because there are so many ways in which the gospel speaks to us and deals with us as individuals but when we read it in a very individualistic way we can miss something very important we can miss the fact that this letter is written to a collective group of believers we can miss the fact well it's it's easy to miss this fact because English is an inadequate language the you is plural so it's not actually speaking to an individual you it's speaking to a collective you and that's helping us to realize that this promise in verse 6 is not primarily a promise for us to take as individuals you can take it in that way that's absolutely true but it's primarily a promise that we collectively share as a church family and that is what we care about when we say that we are Presbyterian we care about our local church family we care about the the national work of the gospel as congregations connected all across the nation and we care about our brothers and sisters all across the world we are connected to them we are in this together and that emphasis saturates the letter of Philippians and we saw that in the chapter that we read Paul speaks about his partnership in the gospel with them Paul speaks about them as partakers with him of grace he speaks of how he yearns for them all with the affection of Christ Jesus the same appears later in the chapter he talks about his desire to come and see them and he talks about them striving side by side there it is that was a huge circle it wasn't very directive is striving side by side for the faith of the gospel together it's all teaching us that at the heart of the church is men and women boys and girls serving together striving side by side going forward hand in hand and that is so cool and that is so exciting and it's so reassuring because as you look ahead to the 20 to 2024 if you are anything like me as we look ahead as I look ahead to the coming year I am so easily confronted with the phrase I can't we think about all we want to do all we hope for and you think I can't and the great reformed Calvinist Presbyterian gospel antidote to the feeling I can't is the phrase we can and within that we first and foremost is God he is the one

he is the sovereign God who has begun the work who is continuing the work who is completing the work and he is not going to stop but also within that we is all of you and together we can look ahead to a year of serving God in our different contexts our different communities in the different relationships we have with people we can look together to a year of loving one another more and more a year of building one another up a year of reaching out to our community and boy that is exciting to be able to share in that work together and if you are not yet a Christian or if you're not sure where you stand then just join us and go for it and get stuck in and think I don't need anything I don't need whatever it is that's holding me back does not need to hold me back anymore we're just going to follow him and serve him together because we're all the same we're all stumbling along we're all completely dependent on God and we all need each other but as a great we together oh it's amazing what God can do and so as we go into the new year we go into the new year as a reformed Calvinist

Presbyterian church we believe what the Bible says we believe what this verse says and for that reason we are very very excited amen