



Catalog No. 1702
 Philippians 1:3-11
 Second Message
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 March 29th, 2009

PRAYING WITH PURPOSE

Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote these lines on prayer,
 More things are wrought by prayer
 Than this world dreams of.

The apostle James says in his letter, “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (5:16). Jesus gave the disciples the assurance of answered prayer in these words: “... if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you” (John 16:23). Paul instructed the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). And Richard Foster writes, “For...all those who have braved the depths of the interior life, to breathe was to pray.”¹

But what is the purpose and content of our prayer? What do we ask of the Father in the name of Jesus, without ceasing and with every breath? How should we pray for our high school students as they leave for a missions week?

The apostle Paul has several significant prayers in his letters, including two prayers in Ephesians, one in Colossians, and another in the book of Philippians. As we come to his prayer for the Philippians, Paul helps guide our words for lifting our voices to God our Father and the lover of our souls. Listen to the text:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil 1:3-11 NASB)

In the first eleven verses of Philippians, God is mentioned five times and Christ seven times, as in Christ Jesus, Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, and Christ. In fact, Christ is mentioned 34 times in the 104 verses of Philippians—one third of the book’s verses. To the Jew, the word Christ denotes Messiah, the Anointed One. This is not the first or last name of Jesus.

Obviously, Paul’s thoughts and words were centered on the Father and the Son.

In verses 1-4 the word group for “all” occurs five times: *all the saints, all my remembrance of you, always, every prayer, prayer for you all*. In verses 7-9, the word is used four times and again highlights “all of you.” Paul has the entire church in view, not just a few people. The church is one body designed to function in unity. Each member is important and the whole is greater than the parts. Paul is concerned about the unity of believers in Philippi.

Our text is two sentences in Greek, verses 3-8 and 9-11, and thus difficult to translate into English. The basic thrust of the first section is thanksgiving for the believers in Philippi. In the second section, Paul petitions God for the continued growth of the church. We will examine these two sections and take note of the connection.

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In the first section we find a chiasm:²

- A Thankful and joyful in praying and remembering
- B Thankful because of participation in the gospel
- X God will continue this until the end
- B’ Justified in mind set because of participation in the gospel
- A’ Longings and affections for all the saints in Philippi

This section begins with Paul thanking God and ends with God being his witness. The center of the sentence contains a statement of great confidence in God for his work in the Philippian church. God is first, last, and in the middle of Paul’s praise.

The prayer begins by Paul giving thanks to “my God.” For the apostle, God is personal and relational. He is the one and only God. We hear an echo from the Psalter, where the words “my God” occur some 54 times.

Paul is thankful for the saints in Philippi. The focus of his gratitude is people, not things or circumstances. He prays with joy for his friends. Joy is not based on life being good but on the goodness of God and his presence in our lives.

Paul has a deep affection for his friends in Philippi. He founded the church there on his second missionary journey, in 49 A.D. Dramatic things happened: demons were cast out, an earthquake set prisoners free, people were coming to Christ. The church had an explosive beginning.

The Philippians are his friends, and he prays for them regularly. He longs to see them but he can't, since he is in prison. But he is concerned for them. His longing, expressed in verse 8, is like a yearning or a great desire for a family member. He longs for them with the affection of Christ. Affection signifies deep compassion. His feelings for them are deep in his gut. His concern is not just their relationship to him but their relationship to Christ. His love is Christ's love through him. God knows that these people are in his heart.

There are two phrases in this praise section that I want to give attention to this morning: *participation in the gospel*, and, *he who began a good work ... will perfect it*.

The reason Paul is grateful to God is because the Philippians are involved with the apostle in gospel work. The word "participation" in verse 5 is *koinonia*. This word also occurs in verse 7 in a compound form that combines the preposition "with" and "koinonia." Paul also equates "gospel" with "grace"; the phrases "sharers of the gospel" and "sharers of grace" are parallel. The gospel is the ultimate grace of God. The Philippians are partakers with Paul in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, the establishment of the gospel as true and reliable. Normally we think of *koinonia* as fellowship, corporate worship, sharing donuts on the patio, or a shared life in Christ. But here it has the idea of sharing or partnering in gospel work. This participation by the Philippians has been evident from the beginning, and includes financial support as well as proclamation through life and witness.

The gospel is Paul's single passion in life. He is gospel-centered and gospel-motivated. The Philippians in the past have been actively engaged in the advance and furthering of the gospel, and for that Paul praises his God. His concern in this letter is for the church to live out the gospel in Philippi in the future, even in the face of persecution, continuing to declare Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

Sometimes I wonder if we have missed the bigger picture. Our faith is not for ourselves. Our community is not for ourselves. Our fellowship is not for ourselves. The danger is for our world to get small and for us to focus on our desires and wants. Yes, God has called us to be in an intimate relationship with him. But he has also called us to be participants, sharers in the advancement of his kingdom. Our life in Christ is a witness and testimony to Jesus Christ. Paul helps to expand our world and our purpose for living.

However, even though he is concerned he is confident of the future, that the God who began a good work in them will perfect it until the day of the Lord, i.e., until the day when Christ returns. The good work is most likely the experience of salvation in a transformed life, the work of grace, the fruit of the gospel. God will perfect or complete this work and bring it to an end. The Philippians have been partners in gospel work with Paul from the very first day, and he knows that this will continue until the last day, the day of the Lord. Paul's confidence rests in knowing that God finishes what he begins.

The gospel is all about changing people's lives. God is not interested in a flash-in-the-pan religious experience or simply Sunday attendance. Genuine faith transforms us; it stands the test of time. Believing in Christ begins a process of God working out grace to completion. God does not stop halfway. He is not a quitter. He is a finisher.

This is a tremendous word of assurance. Sometimes we can get side-tracked in our spiritual life. We take two steps forward and one back. There are times when we struggle or become overwhelmed with the thought of falling short. We want to give up. But God is going to finish what he began.

How does an athlete bear the pain of training, a student the years of study, or a traveler the weariness of the journey? They think about winning the race, getting the degree, or reaching the destination. How do we accomplish anything or survive present difficulties? We keep our eyes focused on the goal and live in the light of that goal. For Paul, the goal is the day of the Lord and being complete in that day.

Paul expands our vision. Not only does our world get small in space, it also gets small in time. We get tunnel vision. Paul has us look to the end, the day of the Lord. We live with our feet in the present but our eyes on the horizon, seeing the day of the Lord and God's completed work of grace in us. We are going somewhere and we will get there because God is in control. We don't look at the short but the long view—that God will finish what he has started.

In the second section Paul turns to petition. Essentially what he is confident that God will do, as expressed in verse 6, he now prays for in verses 9-11.

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (1:9-11)

His petition is given in one sentence, which includes several phrases. Essentially there are three basic requests in this prayer.

1. For love to abound more and more

First, Paul prays for love. Love is the top priority (it is mentioned before knowledge). This love is God's love, not mere affection, the word that is used in verse 8. It means to be other-

centered and to seek another's highest good, to place a high value on a person or thing. As we shall see in the rest of the letter, love comes through being a servant, emptying oneself, laying down one's life.

This is one of Paul's concerns for the Philippians. They have been characterized by love, but he is concerned that love might be diminished by selfish ambition. He prays that the love the Philippians have demonstrated might abound more and more.

And love is not blind emotion. It is rooted and based in knowledge and discernment. Knowledge points to experiential knowing of God, not knowing about, but a full knowing through personal relationship. Discernment denotes moral understanding or insight—a word closely connected to wisdom. In order to grow in love we must also grow deeper in our relationship with God and understand his ways. Love then is the heart and head working together as we look to serve, uphold, and minister to others, based on the ways of heaven, not the world.

Sometimes when our coffee cup is full we bump into someone and the coffee spills all over. What spills out of us when we get bumped? Is it love? Our Christian walk is nothing without love. "But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13).

2. To approve the things that really matter

Yesterday my wife and I were with a young couple and their friends. Last month, this young wife gave birth to twin boys, one of whom lived only three hours. We gathered for a time of memory and reflection. Some things are more important than others.

Knowledge and insight are not only connected to the preceding phrase but also the one that follows. The reason for knowledge and insight is so that the Philippians will be able to assess what is absolutely essential.

In the Christian life some things matter and some don't. Some things have eternal value and some don't. We have to evaluate and test to choose how to spend our time and energy. We must think critically and evaluate what is important. We set our priorities based on the things that are important to God. In these opening verses of Philippians we see that what is important is people and love, gospel and community.

As we pray for our high school students going off to King City, we pray for them to approve the things that count. It doesn't matter if the food is good or they get to be with their friends. Cell phones and iPods are not essential. God wants them to spend a week together, focused on the things that are really important.

3. To live a fruitful life

The Philippians have received fruit as a result of their relationship with Jesus. This fruit consists of righteousness. Paul's focus is on behavior, the righteous behavior of the righteous person. The fruitful life that consists of righteousness does not

come through circumcision or the Law, but through the Spirit. Paul will take up this issue in chapter 3.

We belong to Christ. Through him we receive the Spirit who empowers us to live fruitful lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Our lives demonstrate the godly character that comes from a deep relationship with God. This fruit is demonstrated in how we live and relate to others. We can't do this in our own strength, so we pray.

During the winter months a plant appeared in my garden. It grew quite large. We thought it was a pumpkin or watermelon, since we have planted these in the past. It looked impressive, and we were waiting in anticipation. But it turned out to be just a big weed. I took it out and threw it away. We also have an orange tree, and for some reason the oranges have been very good this year. Last night my two-year-old grandson was sitting outside, peeling an orange. He asked me to join him. He handed me a slice and I was amazed by the juicy, succulent taste. Instead of continuing with my tasks, I remained with him savoring the orange. The fruit drew me into relationship. We are not meant to be weeds that don't bear fruit. We are designed to be sweet, attractive, and inviting. There is something about us that tastes good. People want to be with us. They can't get enough of us. And when they get us they get Jesus.

Why are we to live fruitful lives? So that we can important, get attention or be known? No. The reason to live fruitful lives is to bring glory and praise to God. God gets all the credit and the praise.

Paul prays for love to abound based in knowledge and insight, for insight to focus on the things that really matter and for the fruit of godly character. All of these things deal with how we live our lives. This is how we are to pray. But then we ask, What is the goal? Why are we to pray for these things?

Embedded in verse 10 Paul says that the ultimate goal is to be pure and blameless when Christ returns. This phrase is parallel to "being complete at the coming of Christ." The coming of Christ connects the thanksgiving and petition sections. To be complete means to be sincere and blameless. Again, we see the mind set of Paul: to live in the present in light of the end, when God's work in us will be complete.

The word "sincere" literally means to be "without wax." In that culture, a clay pot would be held up to the light to make sure any cracks were not being masked with wax. Thus the word means to be pure, to not have mixed motives. "Blameless" means not to stumble over a rock. The thought is to not stumble over the rock of sin or to cause someone to stumble over us.

The goal of a transformed life, living out the gospel, is to be pure and blameless in the day of the Lord. We pray and look forward to the day when all we desire is the Lord, not the world, when we worship God with a totally pure and undiluted heart. We pray and look forward to the day when sin

not longer trips us up and its effects no longer taint our relationships.

Paul is thankful for what the Philippians have done in the past, and he is confident for their future. But he prays for the present, anticipating the concerns that he will address in subsequent verses. Prior to talking to them about his concerns, however, he talks to God. We would do well to follow this model. Knowing that we need to grow is good, but praying for it is the key to transformation.

Real prayer is life creating and life changing. “Prayer—secret, fervent, believing prayer—lies at the root of all personal godliness,” writes William Carey. To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. . . . In prayer, real prayer, we begin to think God’s thoughts after him: to desire the things he desires, to love the things he loves, to will the things he wills.³

We are the saints of Jesus Christ living in Cupertino, Sunnyvale and San Jose. We are engaged in gospel work. We are participants, fellow sharers with Paul and with the Philippians in getting the word out about Jesus. What is essential to this gospel work is how we live our lives.

Paul prays and we should do the same. I want to close this morning with directed prayer. I will direct us with the words of the apostle’s prayer in several requests. In between each request I am going to leave time for you to pray. You can pray silently for yourself or someone else. You might pray with or for the person next to you. The sound of our audible or inaudible voices is sweet music to our Lord.

Father, we come to you this morning wanting you to transform our lives. We confess to you our lack of love, our preoccupation with things that don’t matter, the bitter fruit in our lives. We give these things to you this morning.

Father, even though we are weak and broken you have called us to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ here in the Bay Area. We pray now for those we know who need Jesus and our witness to them.

Father, we pray for your love tempered with wisdom to abound through us, especially the ability to love those who are difficult to love.

Father, we pray that you would give us insight to organize our time and energy around things that really matter.

Father, we pray that our lives would produce the fruit of godly character.

Father, give us the confidence, assurance, and trust that what you have started in our lives through the gospel you will finish. Help us to set our sights on the end of our journey.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 25-25)

¹ *The Contemporaries Meet the Classics on Prayer*, compiled by Leonard Allen (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 2003), 18.

² Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1995, 76

³ *The Contemporaries Meet the Classics on Prayer*, 16-17.