

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, each day is Your precious gift:
May we not live as if this was just another 'normal' day,
But as if You might use it for the great things of Your glory!
May we not stand back from doing what is right for others and ourselves,
But boldly confess our sins and present ourselves for Your service!
You are worthy of all our praise, Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: preaching

Pray for those who are preaching this Sunday. Preachers prepare by reading, writing notes, praying, and much more! Pray that the Lord will use them all to His glory.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for Universities and Colleges beginning courses right now*
- *Pray for South Africa at a time of changing leadership*
- *Give thanks for the joy of knowing that Christ has forgiven our sins*

Meditation

All You would have me do for You, Lord Jesus,
Is held within that precious word, 'obedience'.
Once this word was just a chain around my neck;
I struggled with its harsh repression,
Like an imposition on my life, demanding more.
But You have looked into my eyes,
And I have looked into Your heart.

I had struggled with an image of myself,
And I wanted what the world wanted me to be;
And not the transformed life of Your eternal image, Lord,
Containing so much more for me than I can ever see,
because You love me unconditionally, nothing less:
and I had failed to find my total freedom in Your hands,
But now I am set free!

Bible Study - Philippians 1:3-8

³ I thank my God every time I remember you in prayer; ⁴ and in all my prayers for you I never cease to pray with joy ⁵ because of your sharing in the Gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that He who did a good work in you at the beginning will complete it by the day of Jesus Christ.

⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you who hold me in your heart, for in my imprisonment and the defence and confirmation of the Gospel, you have all shared in God's grace with me. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

Review

Paul began his letter to the Philippian church with a formal address which we studied yesterday. The first two verses also showed a remarkable depth of theology, because Paul took the formal means of address used in his day and filled them with some remarkably Gospel truths. This fills us with a great sense of anticipation. Will Paul continue and do the same in the rest of his letter? The verses we read today gives an answer to this question, and it is a resounding 'yes'! Our passage continues to be a semi-formal introduction to a letter, and it is easy to read the other letters of Paul and see that he began most of his letters to the churches with similar sentiments of praise and fellowship. One example is Colossians 1:3-6 where you will see many similar features to today's reading; that is, prayer and love for God's people and the Gospel. What Paul wrote within our passage today is not merely formal, but also deeply personal, however. You cannot fail to be moved by the genuine sense of affection and joy within the whole passage, and it is an expression of the considerable depths of his feelings towards the church at Philippi, a church founded at the most distant point of his extensive second missionary journey (see Acts 16:12f.).

Our passage begins with Paul's concern for the Philippian church as shown by his prayers. Verse 3 is notoriously difficult to translate and you will find that it reads very differently in some of the Bibles you may have. What comes across, however, is a deep sense of mutual care and concern between Paul and the Philippian church that expressed itself in regular prayer. Even the Greek word for 'prayer' used in verses 3 and 4 reflects formal and regular intercession, which is remarkable given that the church at Philippi was so far from where Paul was when the letter was written (he was being held in prison, most probably in Rome). The passage also talks about Paul's 'sharing in the Gospel' (1:5) with the church, and this indicates a close sense of fellowship between Paul and the Christians at Philippi. This fellowship is a major factor in the rest of the letter and we will find it is important for our study; and one thing we will find is that the words Paul uses hide an important Gospel truth about the nature of Christian fellowship, demonstrating that it is based on Christ and not natural human affection.

So Paul appears to have had a relationship with the Philippian Christians which was both deeply spiritual and deeply personal, and verse 7 reveals one of the reasons. Paul wrote to the Philippian church from prison, and he saw in his captivity a suffering that he shared with the church for the sake of the Gospel. As we will discover, the Philippian church had a number of serious problems, and as the letter unfolds we will find that Paul seeks to help and encourage them by equating these with his own sacrifices for the proclamation of the Gospel. Paul empathised with the church and spoke to them about how all of God's people are united in the sufferings which arise from the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what is meant by a 'fellowship of suffering'.

These verses continue to unveil Paul's deep sense of attachment to the churches which were founded as a result of his own work. Though he always gave Jesus Christ the glory for the work he did, his involvement in the founding of the Philippian church (Acts 16:11ff) gave him apostolic authority to address it in this letter.

Going Deeper

The structure of this passage is straightforward. Paul begins his letter to the Philippians with a characteristic expression of joy and thanksgiving for the life of the church; and he goes on to offer prayers for them and showing insight into the whole New Testament understanding of Christian love and fellowship. Above all, Paul insists that Jesus Christ is at the centre of both our fellowship and our witness as His people in the world.

Further Study

church life today. Let the Lord help you change your attitude and feelings about the church.

- *Can you say that the Gospel is the overriding factor in all you do within your church fellowship, despite the problems? Pray about this and seek more fellowship in your church, not less.*

Final Prayer

You have led us through this day, O Lord. You have led us through things we knew about, and experiences we had not known were coming, and You have been there all the time. Forgive us for when we have doubted You or ignored Your presence, and give us joy again when this day ends; through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN

Thanks, joy and prayers

If you have not read Paul's letter to the Philippians all the way through, you will probably not know that the last part of the letter is taken up with Paul's express thanks to the Philippian church for sending him a gift (4:10ff). Indeed, it appears from this final passage of the letter that the Philippians gave Paul gifts on a number of occasions; 'you sent me help for my needs more than once' (4:16). The picture we gain is of a church very much concerned to maintain Paul in his missionary journeys and attempting to make sure that he was able to operate his mission free from financial and other material worries. Those who do missionary work today know how important it is for such matters to be dealt with properly, and it is not surprising that Paul sounds indebted to the church for their support. Some have wondered how a church so far from the rest of Paul's areas of work could keep in such regular contact, but we show our ignorance of the world of the Roman Empire if we doubt its ability to transmit frequent and secure goods and messages. The speed of messages throughout the known world was a key feature of this ancient and impressive civilisation, and we often fail to appreciate this.

The key theme at the opening part of Paul's greeting of the Philippians is prayer. The New Testament often uses a word for prayer which reflects the Old Testament idea of prayer as praise to God, coming from a word meaning 'to bow down' (Greek – 'proskuneo'). It is very noticeable that in these verses Paul uses a different word, the 'de'esis'. This word conveys the idea of request, and lies at the heart of what today we describe as 'intercession' or 'petition'. It was also a word that was used to refer to the formal prayers said by Jews (and others) at set times of the day. Therefore, when Paul said that he remembered the Philippian church in prayer, it is most likely that he prayed for them specifically at those set times of prayer, using information he had from letters about what was going on. Paul was no stranger to spontaneous or spirit-led prayer, but neither was he a stranger to regular and sustained formal prayer which disciplined him in his faith and the proclamation of the Gospel. Have you had the experience of being profoundly encouraged when someone you respect says that they do indeed pray for you regularly? Then you will know how the Philippians felt when reading this letter.

Paul prayed fervently and personally to God. His opening words were 'I thank my God ...', in which that little word 'my' reflects Paul's personal assurance of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It was a form of address to God which may have sounded outlandish to those who first heard it, especially Jews! His prayers, whatever the circumstances under which the letter was sent and received, were a matter of joy for Paul (1:4). As will become clear later, joy in the midst of suffering is a general theme of his letter, and either joy or rejoicing are mentioned over 14 times. Today, we think of joy as being a brief emotion, something that has to be inspired or created by something! However, the Greek word means something quite different, as it refers to a state of contentment and happiness due to having found peace. Joy, for Paul, was therefore not an emotion or mood but a permanent characteristic of one who had found salvation in Jesus Christ! This, surely, is a scriptural truth of great value, for it is God's gift to us!

Fellowship and sharing

In verses 5 and 6, Paul's letter turns towards the subject of fellowship, and our sharing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul was utterly convinced of the supreme value of the Gospel for all people, and he therefore measured all human experiences against it. The Greek word he used for fellowship is 'koinonia', and although this is well known in Christian circles, its real significance in Paul's letters often remains misunderstood. The word generally refers to a common ownership of something of great value, and suggests that individuals place to one side personal issues for the greater value of what is possessed together; in this case, the Gospel.

I am aware that this study may be coming across as something of a 'word study', but a proper understanding of what scripture says about fellowship is essential. Fellowship is not based upon common likes or dislikes, personality traits or even localities or areas, it is based completely upon our ownership of the Gospel which God has given us all through Jesus Christ. If our church life is based on an idea of 'fellowship' which expresses, for example, our worship preferences or our likes or dislikes of various church leaders, then we have departed from the scriptural foundations of true fellowship. There is little theological disagreement about this, and therefore little room for us to try and wiggle our way out of this scriptural truth. The value of the Gospel is far higher than anything else, and we must therefore declare, with intent and purpose, that what binds us together in Christ is greater than all the personal, earthly or cultural issues that divide us. There is no other Gospel, however we organise our church life.

Paul's world of mission across the expanse of the Roman Empire may have seemed farfetched to some in his own day, but the church at Philippi valued the Gospel so much that they were prepared to give generously to Paul without conditions and with complete trust (see 4:10ff and also 2 Cor 8:7,8). In this way, the Gospel was proclaimed, even when Paul was in prison; the Philippians showed real Christian 'koinonia' through their gifts, and he showed them this same 'koinonia' in addressing them with love and affection even though they faced many problems as a church, both within their ranks, and from the enemy's attacks on them 'from without'.

If the church continued in this spirit of fellowship, of 'koinonia', Paul was confident that God would work through everything the Philippian church was doing. There are a number of indications within Paul's letter that there were problems within the fellowship at Philippi (see 1:15, 1:28, 2:14, 3:2 etc.) but he was confident that if the church kept the Gospel at its heart, then problems with opponents would be overcome. For example, the 'crooked and perverse world' (2:15) and 'enemies of the cross of Christ' (3:17ff) would be overcome not through any merit of the church, but through its adherence to the fellowship of the Gospel. Paul believed that God had given the Gospel to human hands, but it was something that remained in His ultimate control, and something that He would complete (1:5). It was the practical evidence of the Philippian church's 'koinonia' in caring for him that convinced Paul that the Lord was truly at work there.

Sharing in suffering and the defence of the Gospel

As Paul continued, verse 7 develops the same theme, with a sense of mutual care that is difficult to translate (as in verse 3). Some versions of the Bible render this verse similarly to my translation: 'it is right for me to think this of all of you who hold me in your heart', and others render 'it is right for me to think this of you as I hold you all in my heart!' The Greek is quite unclear as to who is holding who in their heart; yet strangely, it hardly matters, for we feel that both must be equally true, because true Christian fellowship was surely at work.

Paul, however, writes from the position of one who was a prisoner; speaking of 'my imprisonment and the defence and confirmation of the Gospel' (1:7) which through fellowship, he saw as shared by the Philippian church. This sentence is also very interesting, for Paul used two legal words 'defence' and 'confirmation' which would have been used in the formal legal proceedings against Paul and its presentation to the Imperial authorities in Rome. The details of this are technical, but his use of these words adds to the sense that Paul saw even his trial and its consequences as part of God's gracious plan for his life and the furtherance of the Gospel. He also knew that the charge against him included the possibility of a death sentence. This is something he spoke of in other letters as well as that to the Philippians, for example 'I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.' (Ephesians 3:13); also 'I am now rejoicing

in my sufferings for your sake.' (Col 1:24). It was an extraordinary statement of confidence in the purposes of God and the fellowship of the church under the most extreme personal pressure.

Application

The words of this letter of Paul may seem to us at first to be warm and heartening, and indeed they are. Yet they hide an astonishing confidence in the ultimate purposes of God through the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a confidence in the fellowship of the Church when it is based on the one true Gospel. This is a great challenge for us today, who live in an age when the body of Christ is torn apart by divisions of every kind, based on everything from personal preference to culture. The greetings Paul gives to the churches in his letters, together with the famous prayer of Jesus in John 17 are surely a powerful challenge to all Christians today to work together for the sake of the Gospel we proclaim to a divided world. Satan has worked hard to divide Christians from each other and make it appear that we are more divided than the sinful world we seek to claim for Him. He is wrong, and we need to show this in concrete and practical ways. This is one reason why this website avoids any particular reference to the church in which I am ordained as a minister of the Gospel. I am not ashamed of my church or of anyone else's, but I am concerned that people today make quick assumptions about what they will and won't hear from this or that Church source, and my purpose is to proclaim Gospel truth, not the doctrine or practices of any particular part of God's church.

These verses also contain other challenges. They invite us to maintain regular and disciplined prayer, for example (see notes on verses 3 and 4) and they speak of the duty of God's people to provide the sustenance of those who work for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so that they do not have to face hardship. These are serious issues with immediate and direct consequences. However, the foremost challenge of this scripture must surely be the call to our common heritage and fellowship in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which alone will sustain us to the day of the Lord when Jesus returns.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Is joy something that you feel is placed in your heart by God, or is it more like an emotion? What is the difference in real terms?
2. What does Christian fellowship 'koinonia' mean to you?
3. In a group, each person should write down one sentence which summarises the Gospel. Share these sentences and discuss what you find within them.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find such passages of scripture deeply challenging, and if you read these studies regularly, you may be tired of my constant reference to the importance of unity amongst God's people. However, it is scripture which raises this matter constantly, and I insist that the scriptures tell us that the church of God is always far less than it could or should be if it does not reflect the unity of God Himself. The Bible offers us no other way for the effective proclamation of the Gospel than to be united in Christ, but few think this is worth pursuing! It is astonishing!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *How could you apply any of the Scriptures you have read today? These verses constitute a powerful challenge to our attitudes to fellowship and related issues of*