A Study of the Book of Philippians

Elements of a Successful Prayer (Philippians 1:3-11)

“If the good works were a galaxy of human virtues, we should then have to glorify the disciples, not God. But there is nothing for us to glorify in the disciple who bears the cross, or in the community whose light so shines because it stands visibly on the hill—only the Father which is in heaven can be praised for the ‘good works.’ It is by seeing the cross and the community beneath it that men come to believe in God.”

~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 119

I. Overview

In this opening prayer of the letter, the apostle Paul expresses his deep love and appreciation for the Christians in Philippi. His prayer in verses 3-11 notes how thankful he is for the Philippians, how deeply he loves them, and how often he prays for them. In so doing, Paul highlights the importance of unity within the church, commends the Philippians for their faithful service to the Lord, and encourages the saints to grow spiritually. The apostle will discuss these themes in greater detail later throughout the letter (for further discussion, see Gordon Wiles, Paul’s Intercessory Prayers, 206).

II. Paul’s Opening Prayer

A. A Prayer of Thanksgiving to God (vv. 3-8)

v. 3 - Paul notes that his prayers for them were intentional, personal, consistent, and all-inclusive.

“When Paul states that he gave thanks ‘continually’ he means that he did not forget them in his regular times of prayer” (O’Brien, Philippians, 58). A similar expression can be found in Romans 1:10 and Ephesians 1:16.

v. 4 - In this verse, the apostle not only reiterates verse 3, but he also stresses the manner in which he prays for them.

The noun “joy” and the verb “rejoice” occur fourteen times in this small epistle. As aptly noted by one commentator, “Paul’s joy is unrelated to his own comfort but is instead the contentment that results from seeing the goals of the gospel advanced, whatever that might mean in terms of personal inconvenience” (F. Thielman, Philippians, 49).

Another scholar writes, “Joy is an understanding of existence that encompasses both elation and depression, that can accept with creative submission events which bring delight or dismay because joy allows one to see beyond any particular event to the sovereign Lord who stands above all events and ultimately has control over them” (Hawthorne, Philippians, 18).

vv. 5-6 - Paul identifies the following two reasons for his joy:

- They are partners with him in the ministry. Rather than confine their cooperation to financial support, the immediate context suggests this partnership is far broader (see 1:27, 28; 4:14-15).
• *The Lord will see them ultimately glorified.* Note that Paul's certainty is not based upon the talent and spiritual vitality of the church. Rather, Paul's assurance is grounded in God's creative and sustaining activity.

Also, observe that it is the promise of the future that sustains Paul in the present. Joy is not dictated by present events, but it is rooted in the future event of Christ's second coming!

v. 7 - The term "to feel" or "to think" entails thoughts with actions. In other words, "Paul not only feels deeply for the Philippians, but as a consequence he plans, or schemes how best his concern for them can be actualized in tangible ways" (Hawthorne, 22).

v. 8 - Note what Paul and the Philippians have in common that makes them partners (also, see 2:1-2).

Why do you think Paul felt it necessary to employ the name of the Lord in validating his feelings?

Paul provides an astonishing metaphor of Christ's love to accentuate his own love for the Philippians. The German scholar, Albrecht Bengel, wrote, "it is not Paul who lives within Paul, but Jesus Christ, which is why Paul is not moved by the bowels ['inner being' or 'very core'] of Paul but by the bowels of Jesus Christ" (*Studies*, 2:426).

B. A Prayer of Request to God (vv. 9-11)

v. 9 - Paul's prayer not only thanks the Lord for the Philippians, but his prayer also centers on the spiritual growth of the believers. The content of his prayer is clear—that their love may increase.

Observe the specifics of this prayer for the Philippians:

• *Their love might ever-increase.*

• *Their love be accompanied by knowledge and discernment.* "Knowledge" speaks of practical understanding which allows one to apply to all areas of life. "Spiritual discernment" refers to the ability to distinguish "the things that really matter" from a variety of competing ideas (see W. B. *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 190).
v. 10 - Paul clearly indicates that love, and only love, can bring forth discernment and purity (see Romans 13:10).

The apostle’s prayer seeks for the Philippians to not only be morally pure, but also that they conduct their lives so as not to give an offense either towards those within the church or to those outside it (see Hawthorne, 28).

v. 11 - The reason for Paul’s prayer for the Philippians is that they might be filled with righteousness in order to glorify the Lord.

Observe that this righteousness cannot be obtained on their own efforts, but rather, this fruit of righteousness comes from the Lord (see Gal 5:22).

III. Intersect

A. Unity among believers is vital for both their individual spiritual growth and for the glory of Christ. Jealousy and dissension among believers serves as one of Satan’s most effective weapons.

1 Corinthians 1:10-13a -

B. The Lord works through what the world considers weakness. We must be careful not to determine success in ministry by numerical growth, impressive credentials, fine physical facilities, or comfortable lifestyles.

1 Corinthians 2:1, 4 -

C. Paul’s prayer serves as a template for how to pray for others. Our prayers for family members and friends should include the desire to see them grow in their knowledge of the Lord.

Colossians 1:9-14 -

"The realm of Christian love is subject to Christ, not to the world. The Church can never tolerate any limits set to the love and service of the brethren. For where the brother is, there is the Body of Christ, and there is his Church. And there we must also be." ~ D. Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 258
For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

What is one area that you can glean from this passage on how to be more intentional in your prayers for others? Be specific. You may also want to read Paul's prayer for the church at Colossae in Colossians 1:9-14 for further insight.

Commit yourself to pray for two or three individuals according to Paul's example. You may then want to send an email or a text at the end of the week letting these individuals know you were praying for them. Be sure to tell them how you were praying for them.