

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

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Today, focus your thoughts on a friends and pray especially for him or her. If possible, make contact by phone or social networking in order to share your care and concern

On-going prayers

- **Pray about worship.** *Pray for God's people to come alive in worship, so that they might share in the blessings of God.*
- *Pray for the UK and the after effects of the Raoul Moat manhunt*
- *Give thanks for the pleasure given to many through music and the arts*

Meditation

All that I must do for You, Lord Jesus,
Is held within the call to be 'obedient'.
But once this word was just a chain around my neck;

I struggled with its harsh repression,
Its imposition on my life, demanding more.
I struggled with an image of myself,
As sold in servitude and seared with sin
My wants did not portray a human being,
Just the advertising bill-boards of the day!

But You have looked into my heart,
And I have looked at yours;
Nothing now can be the same,
For You have changed the wandering soul within
And I have learned to love myself again!
Real life has now been found within this human breast!

Now I live content to be obedient,
because You love me unconditionally, no less:
and where I failed to find my liberty myself,
By trusting in Your Word I am set free!

Bible passage - 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.

Bible Study

Review

These verses say much about Paul's relationship with the Philippians. He prayed for his friends there and clearly trusted their ability to proclaim the Gospel.

There is no doubt that Paul founded the church at Philippi (Acts 16), and this accounts for the evident warmth of this letter. He begins by greeting the church (1:1,2) and then speaks about his prayers for them (1:3-6), emphasising their shared experiences of the evangelistic task. Certainly, the fellowship at Philippi proved to be a springboard for the growth of the church in that region of the Roman Empire.

If you read the beginning of any of Paul's letters, you will find that most of them include a phrase similar to that found here; *'I thank my God every time I remember you in my prayers ...'* (Rom 1:9, 1 Cor 1:4, 2 Cor 1:11, Eph 1:16, Phil 1:4, Col 1:3, 1 Thess 1:2, 2 Thess 1:3, 1 Tim 2:1). Moreover, this expression of thanks and prayer reflects something of the reason for each letter. When Paul wrote to the Romans, for example, he prayed about coming to Rome and announcing the Gospel at the heart of the Capital; or when Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians), he prayed about spiritual riches and being focussed on Christ, before speaking strongly about Christian unity (1 Cor 1-3) and the spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12, 13). So here in this reading, Paul writes to the Philippians about faithfulness and standing firm the proclamation of the Gospel (1:6), and we will find that this is a basic theme of the whole letter. Later on, we will find that the Philippian Christians seem to have had some problems with Christian doctrine, but this had not damaged their relationship with Paul, and he was able to tell them the truth without the difficulty of personal animosities.

In this passage, we discover that Paul was in prison when he wrote this great letter (1:7). Whilst writing, it was perhaps poignant for him to remember that he had been miraculously released from prison when he had first visited Philippi (Acts 16:26f.). But now, this great evangelist who had once travelled freely around the Roman Empire was bound and unable to evangelise openly. Yet this appears to have been God's will for Paul, and his captivity meant that important letters of encouragement were written and Paul was able to pray for the work of the Gospel in churches throughout the Empire. We cannot underestimate the value of these things.

Significantly, this passage shows that Paul prayerfully placed his trust in others to carry out the work he had started. He was able to do this because from the beginning, the Philippians had shared *'in the Gospel from the first day until now'* (1:5); they had also *'shared in God's grace with me'* (1:7). This sharing gave Paul confidence that the work of the Gospel that had been started would be completed (1:6). Now today, we live in a world in which great leaders frequently find it hard to stand back and trust others for what they once did, and perhaps out of false pride, some will not hand on to others the baton of leadership. In contrast, Paul demonstrates here the godliness of trusting others with the work of God, and it we should learn from him.

We can also learn from Paul's dedication to prayer, for through prayer, he was able to use the time available to him fruitfully. The phrase *'I never cease to pray with joy'* (1:4) could mean simply that Paul was joyful whenever he prayed for the Philippians. However, this phrase is not straightforward and contains a hint of far more, and it could well indicate that Paul's prayers were frequent. He was able therefore to demonstrate the value of using every situation to serve God and others.

People can be tempted to think that passages such as this are merely the natural expression of sentiment at the beginning of a letter, but it contains some valuable insight. Paul was not just a great evangelist and Christian leader, merely because of the churches he had founded. He was a great man of God because he was able and willing to share the work of the Gospel and not dominate it. Moreover, he used all the circumstances of life to work for the Kingdom, including imprisonment.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Thanks, joy and prayers
- Fellowship and sharing
- Sharing in suffering and the defence of the Gospel

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.

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.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Is joy just an emotion? Share your experiences of joy and also the wide variety of circumstances in which you are joyful. What does joy mean to you?
2. What does Christian fellowship mean to you, and how can this be strengthened?
3. In a group, each person should write down one sentence to summarise the Gospel. Share these sentences and discuss what you find within them.

Personal comments by author

I find such passages of scripture deeply challenging, and if you read these studies regularly, you may have noticed my regular references to the importance of unity amongst God's people. However, it is scripture which constantly raises this matter, 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 exploring discipleship

- *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 church life today. Ask the Lord to help you change your attitude and feelings about the church.*
- *Can you say with conviction that the Gospel is the overriding factor in everything you do within your church fellowship? 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
