

Prayer

The glory of Your world, Lord God, is beyond our comprehension. For within it we find love that changes darkness to light, we find joy which triumphs over disaster, and we find hope in the midst of trial and distress. Surely You are there within Your creation; there for all to see Your glory. Praise to You, Lord Jesus, the Saviour of the World. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray in absolute silence. Do not try to fill the silence with your words, but listen to what the Lord says.

On-going prayers

- **Pray about worship.** *Pray for the musicians who lead the worship at your church. Pray that they will grow in sensitivity to the Spirit.*
- *Give thanks to God for the way He works through forgiveness to free people from guilt and shame*
- *Pray for the UK and the after effects of the Raoul Moat manhunt*

Meditation

I glory in everything You do for me, Lord Jesus.

You give me courage to endure life's struggles,
To refuse to be conquered by trouble.

You give me a heart to watch out for the needy,
Despite all my selfish inclinations.

You give me strength to stand firm in faith ,
And apply what I believe to what I do.

You give me love when my heart is sorely tested;
The ability to forgive when offended:

You give me the power to rise above the ordinary;
To do the best for You and for Your glory!

You give me a vision of real hope for the future
So I may know my place within Your Kingdom!

I glory in everything You do in me, Lord Jesus.

Bible passage - Philippians 1:8-11

⁸ For God is my witness that I feel deeply for all of you with the affection that comes from Jesus Christ.

⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow even more and more resulting in knowledge and the discernment ¹⁰ to decide what is of genuine value, so that you may be pure and blameless in the day of Christ, ¹¹ having produced the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Bible Study

Review

This is Paul's prayer for the church at Philippi. It is a fascinating and succinct guide to Christian living, which is well worth our careful attention.

After a short introduction (1:8), this reading contains Paul's prayer for Philippian church, and it is full of the same sense of warm fellowship we found in yesterday's passage. Paul speaks of feeling 'deeply' for his friends, and his feelings are expressed within a prayer (1:9-11). This prayer is all one sentence, and it flows from one topic to another, but it conveys far more than mere sentiment. It is a heartfelt call to the Philippians to put into practice the Gospel they have received, and do this for the praise and glory of God. They are called to '*produce the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ*' (1:11).

This all sounds very encouraging when first read, but because we are familiar with these words, it is easy for us to read them too quickly. Our familiarity then means that we do not stop to consider carefully why Paul has written as he has. These verses speak about love overflowing '*more and more*' (1:9), about discernment (1:9), and also being '*pure and blameless in the day of Christ*' (1:10). Now we can all sing such phrases in songs of praise, but all who wish to get to grips with God's Word will want to try and understand far more.

To begin with, Paul makes a series of prayerful requests (1:9,10), leading up to a climax, as follows

- That love may overflow ...
- That this may result in 'knowledge' and discernment
- Which leads to discernment in what is right and wrong
- So that the individual may be blameless before Christ

Each step is significant, and the whole pathway is a helpful guide to spiritual living. Paul's prayer suggests that the primary rule of Christian living is to act with love at all times. Of course, Paul says a great deal about love within his letters and we can imagine that he said similar things within his preaching. In general, his teaching is that love is not a sentimental human prop, but a tough, realistic and effective way of life that yields results. Here, he says plainly that by overflowing with love in every aspect of life, the Christian will grow in knowledge of the things of God and gain the power of discernment of what is right and wrong. This is a high prize indeed, and one to which we should surely aspire.

Paul's prayer goes further than this, however, because it seems to have in mind a time in the future when Christians will stand before God to receive His judgement. He prays that they will be found blameless '*in the day of Christ*' (1:10), which surely means the day of His return. Now in the first century, Christians did not distinguish between the day of Christ's return and the day when someone might die, as we distinguish between them today. For the individual, whichever came first would be a day of judgement before God and meeting with the risen Christ, and the early Christians were not afraid to think forward to such a time with joy and anticipation. Here, Paul prays that when this time comes, his Philippian friends will be '*pure and blameless*' (1:10) before God, and able to demonstrate the '*fruit of righteousness*' (1:11), based on a life of godly living.

Here, Paul uses the phrase '*fruit of righteousness*' to mean the evidence of a life lived for Christ Jesus, in His service and the service of others. It is of course important to remember that this fruit of righteousness is not what saves people, for people are saved by Jesus Himself on the basis of their faith in Him. The disciplines of daily living can never be presented as proof that someone is 'saved', they can only be proof that someone who has been saved has obediently put that faith into action, and lived for Christ.

So this passage is a summary prayer asking that God's people might fulfil their calling and eventually stand faultless before God, and it contains more than a hint at how this result may be achieved. There are many good summaries of Christian living in the New Testament (e.g. Rom. 12:1,2, Eph. 3:16-21 etc.) , and this one is worth remembering with the rest.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Calling God as a witness (1:8)
- A prayer for love and its consequences
- Knowledge and discernment
- The challenge to show the fruits of righteousness

Going Deeper

Our task today is to look more closely at Paul's brief opening prayer for the Philippian church, a fellowship to which he felt so close.

Calling God as a witness (1:8)

What is remarkable about verse 8 is the way in which Paul calls God as 'witness' to what he has just said about his affection for the Philippian church. For a Jewish person, calling God as witness was just not done, for that was equivalent to breaking the third commandment; 'You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God' (Ex 20:7), commonly spoken of as 'you shall not take the Lord's name in vain'. This much misunderstood commandment forbade a Jew from using the name of God to verify an oath or from calling on the Lord as a witness, as Paul does here, and he would have known this well. What therefore would make Paul say something that could be badly misunderstood like this in his own day? The answer lies in the Gospel relationship with God through Jesus Christ that Paul preached and believed. If we look closely at what Paul said, he not only showed familiarity with God by calling him to witness to his affection for the church at Philippi, he also declared that his sentiments came from Jesus Christ Himself! (see end of verse 8).

This extraordinary verse could only come from Paul's powerful sense of the presence of Christ with him 'as God' during the formal prayer times he had for the Philippian church (see yesterday's study). In this private prayer, he believed that his unity in true fellowship with the Philippian church was something that was founded on the Gospel and the will of God, and he therefore used these powerful words to convey his belief that what he was saying to the church was God's will. We read verse 8 almost casually in the midst of what Paul says, but it is a remarkable declaration of confidence in the Christ and the Gospel.

A prayer for love and its consequences.

Paul's prayer for the church begins in a way that appears to us to be typical of other prayers in the New Testament, asking the Lord for love, the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit, to be poured out in abundance on the church 'that your love may overflow even more and more ...' (1:9). Elsewhere, Paul's famous 'hymn of love' (1 Cor. 13) describes love as the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit, and in Romans 8, Paul talks of the unsurpassed love of God with these words; 'who will separate us from the love of God ...' (Rom 8:35) showing us that the source of all love is God Himself. Again and again the New Testament emphasises the significance of love, in particular the love of Jesus on the Cross and the love of God shown in his resurrection. There was no better way to begin a prayer for a church so close to Paul's heart.

But the love talked about in the New Testament is not sentimental love, sexual love, family love, or any other love based on emotional attachment. The word used uniquely by the New Testament to convey the love of God is the Greek word 'agape' which is distinct from all these forms of love. 'Agape' is characterised by two things, firstly an unchanging, faithful and undeservedly positive attitude towards others, and secondly, some specific, practical expression of that love. God's love for us is 'agape' love because it had all these characteristics and was demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus (Romans 5:8). Jesus Himself urged us all to show these same qualities of love to each other (John 13:34).

Paul knew what he was talking about when he talked about 'agape' in his prayer for the Philippians, and his prayer was twofold; firstly, that love would not only 'overflow' from the church to others, but that it would do so 'more and more'; Paul's prayer was something of a call to both pastoral care and evangelism! Secondly, however, this 'agape' love had to be shown in some way, and this is indicated by the two important words at the end of verse 9; the overflowing of love should result in 'knowledge' and 'discernment'. These words stop us in our tracks. They may not have been the first thing that entered our minds when thinking about the love of God and its Gospel benefits!

Knowledge and discernment

Here, knowledge does indeed mean knowledge of the mind, but it also means knowledge about God. It is sometimes suggested today that knowledge and faith are somehow incompatible, and that whilst faith is all important, knowledge as such is secondary to what we mean by faith in Jesus Christ. That is not what the Bible says, here or anywhere else. When the Spirit of God moves amongst people, one thing that invariably happens is that those touched by the Lord find they have a desire to know more about God, through prayer, through reading God's Word, the Bible, and through talking to other Christians. The acquisition of knowledge about the Lord is a direct consequence of the work of God in the heart of the believer, and this natural truth is an important part of Paul's prayer.

Alongside knowledge, Paul mentions the gift of discernment, which means 'to decide what is of genuine value ... in the day of Christ' (1:10). The gift of discernment is listed as one of the spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:10) and is closely linked to the idea of Wisdom in the Old Testament (see Deut 4:6; Prov. 1:5 etc). Discernment is commonly thought of as the ability to perceive what is of God and what is not; whether of evil or of the world. Here, in Paul's prayer for the Philippian church, he talks of it as a gift of God which enables us to perceive not just the difference between good and evil, but 'what is ... of value' (1:10) in God's eyes. There are, for example, many good things that any of us might do at any moment, so discernment is about knowing the difference between what God wants us to do and what He wants us to leave alone!

When described like this, discernment is a really helpful gift, and is something that we would all value. We can often feel that there are so many things that need our attention, so many people who need help, so many causes that need assistance or finance, for example, we do not know which should be given priority. But we cannot escape the question about what should be given our priority, and this is where the gift of discernment comes in. On the one hand, it is built on godly knowledge built up over years, and on the other hand, it is a gift of God through which He can inspire us to know the truth.

The challenge to demonstrate the fruits of righteousness

Such 'knowledge and discernment' are the direct result of the overflowing of love in the heart of a believer or in a church fellowship such as that at Philippi. They are the practical demonstration of that love as it becomes rooted in the hearts, making the believer 'pure and blameless in the day of Christ' (1:10). Paul's prayer for his beloved Philippian church was that not only would they respond to the Gospel and the love of God, but they would allow it to spill over in their lives, and thus grow in knowledge and discernment. In this way they could be confident that their work for the Lord was indeed His will.

We will find out later that Paul said all this for a purpose. Like many churches today, the Philippian church was full of dissention and uncertainty, and Paul's prayer was designed to show them the way forward. The prayer concludes with what sounds more like a challenge from a preacher than a prayer, for it strongly suggests that those who follow his advice will 'produce the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ' (1:11). The fruit of righteousness in this context is clearly the proclamation of the Gospel which was always Paul's goal. For him, everything was secondary to the work of proclaiming the Gospel which declared God's righteousness for all through Jesus Christ (see, for example, 1 Cor 1:18ff or Phil 1:15ff).

Application

Paul's prayer for the Philippian church is one that teaches us much, and is extremely valuable. As time has gone by and the church has become institutionalised, many feel that the quality of overflowing love Paul wrote of has been lost. This is too simplistic a view, of course, for none of us can ever know the full truth of what is done in the name of our Lord Jesus by His followers; these things are hidden in the heart of God and only partially seen by us. Part of the discipline of love is to accept that we do not know everything!

What each of us can do is to assess how our own church fellowships measure up to the quality of 'agape' love that Paul prays for the Philippian church. It may be that we fall short, either in the overflowing of love, or the increasing of that overflowing, or in our knowledge of the Lord, or in discernment of His will. All of these are connected, and all are crucially important for the Gospel we preach and our walk with the Lord.

This message may well be a hard one for us to face, for it is easier to point the finger than to accept our own failings. The challenge however, starts with love. The Lord longs to give us all a heart of love as we submit to the love our Saviour has shown us, and once true 'agape' love has been planted in us, and we can find this nowhere else except in Christ, then we are transformed. The prayer Paul prayed for the Philippian church can become our own experience as we earnestly seek knowledge about the Lord, and practice the discernment that enables us to be fruitful in the proclamation of the Gospel. It is a tragedy that too many Christians have been sold a version of Christian faith that falls far short of such abandonment to the will of God, and too many people read scriptures such as these as if they applied to others, and not themselves.

The reason Paul's letters are in the Bible is because they show the truth of God's Word for us all. Our task is to get to know more of God's Word and the God who gave it; then we will be able to exercise the gift of discernment and show real agape love throughout our lives.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Paul talks of his regular prayers for the church at Philippi. Have you ever felt prayed regularly and in earnest for a church fellowship? Share this in your group?
2. Think of ways in which love 'overflows' from the church of God, and consider how it can do so even more.
3. Discuss what you mean by the word 'discernment'. Give example to each other of when you have exercised discernment, and encourage one another.

Personal comments by author

I have often been led to pray for a church, and then wondered why it is that God has placed it on my heart. The promptings of the Spirit are something we get to know over a period of time by being open to what He might say, even acting on 'impulse', accepting that we may be right or wrong, but the Lord knows what He is doing. The most important thing for us to do is to love other people, especially other Christians, and have a sense of concern for their health and well being. This is a challenge for us today when most people feel it is easier to be critical of churches than lovingly accepting of them!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *In what way does love flow out of you through the things you do for God and for others? I know this is a difficult question to answer, but sometimes, scripture presents us with such challenges all too sharply. Try to be conscious of your words and actions so that you reflect the Lord in all you do.*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to accept things from others in the life of the church, and become isolated because people will not deal with them. If you recognise anyone in your fellowship by this description, do your best to help them.*

Final Prayer

You are merciful and kind to each of us, Lord Jesus. You know the nature of our sin and yet You forgive; You know the consequences of our actions, and gently lead us on the right path. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for Your generosity; however, if we are ever obstinate, please deal with us with power and authority! AMEN
