

**PRAYER AS THANKSGIVING & PETITION****Philippians 1:1-11****Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road****Plymouth, Michigan 48170****Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 01.04.2004**

Ask any number of Christians to name their favorite of the Apostle Paul's letters, and most likely the majority of them will say Philippians. Perhaps one of the reasons Philippians is so well liked is because we like the Apostle Paul that we meet here. After all, there is the bewildering Paul of Romans who writes theology that is not easy to grasp; there is the bombastic Paul of Galatians who lets his opponents have it "right between the eyes"; there is the biting Paul of 2 Corinthians who, at times, sinks his teeth in with caustic criticism; and there is the baffling Paul of 1 Corinthians who refers to customs and circumstances about which we know so little. Yes, these statements are simplistic generalizations, but the point is that the Paul of Philippians is like an old friend that we meet at Starbucks and, over a cup of coffee, we catch up on what has happened in each other's life since last we met.

Philippi, in northeastern Greece, was the first major center where Paul preached the gospel in Europe. The story of the founding of the church in this city is recorded in Acts 16:11-40. It was Paul's second missionary journey, and he—along with Silas, Timothy, and Luke—arrived with the gospel at Philippi around A.D. 49. Perhaps the best-known incident of Paul's first visit to Philippi is the climatic story of the Philippian jailer's conversion and the incredible events surrounding it. Women seem to have played a significant role in the Philippian church, not only in terms of providing for the physical needs of the first missionaries, but also in working side by side with them in preaching the gospel. In Phil 4:2-3, Paul mentions two women in particular: Euodia and Syntyche. From Luke's account in Acts, we learn that Lydia, the first convert, welcomed Paul and his colleagues into her home and provided for them at the outset of their evangelistic ministry.

We cannot be sure how long Paul and his companions stayed in Philippi, and we know little about Paul's ongoing relationship with this church after his somewhat hasty departure from their city. On the basis of statements in 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul

apparently paid at least two visits to Philippi not recorded in Acts.

The occasion of the Philippian Letter is to be found primarily in Paul's friendship with the church of Philippi. In particular, Epaphroditus, who has been with Paul, is returning back to Philippi and is probably the carrier of the letter, and Paul wishes to report on his state of affairs and to thank the Philippians for their generous gift. It is the early A.D. 60s, and Paul is a prisoner in Rome.

<sup>1</sup>Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

<sup>2</sup>Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup>I thank my God every time I remember you. <sup>4</sup>In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy <sup>5</sup>because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, <sup>6</sup>being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

<sup>7</sup>It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. <sup>8</sup>God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

<sup>9</sup>And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, <sup>10</sup>so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup>filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God (TNIV).

Paul's thanksgivings often introduce themes that he will deal with in more detail in the body of the letter. Here in the opening verses of Philippians, Paul touches on three topics to which he is going to return: (1) the Philippians' participation in the gospel, (2) the way in which God is going to continue the work begun in them until it is brought to completion on the day of Jesus Christ, and (3) Paul's own imprisonment and defense of the gospel.

Notice again the first two verses:

<sup>1</sup>Paul and Timothy, servants **of Christ Jesus**,

To all the saints **in Christ Jesus** at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

<sup>2</sup>Grace and peace to you **from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**.

From its very first lines, Philippians reflects the transformation brought by the gospel to every part of human life. Writers and recipients alike are defined by their relationship to God and to Christ, and what the writers wish for their readers are gifts from God and

the Lord Jesus Christ. Every facet of life is transformed by the fact of Jesus Christ. Paul does not identify himself as an apostle probably because of his friendship with the Christians at Philippi: he speaks to them as a friend speaks to a friend, and everyone is identified on the basis of Christ Jesus. “Of Christ Jesus”—we have here the first of at least sixty-one references to Christ in this letter. Whatever else is said, everything has Christ as its cause and its focus.

Too often we overlook this obvious fact. Too often we judge one another and even set the boundaries of our fellowship based upon doctrinal disputes and personal preferences. Brothers and sisters, the Churches of Christ have become too much like Baskin-Robbins: we have too many flavors to satisfy folks that cannot agree on the sufficiency of Jesus Christ. The result has been that we are in the midst of an identity crisis. This is not surprising, for when we forget *whose* we are, we will inevitably be confused about *who* we are. I have no desire to be a conservative Christian or a liberal Christian. I have no desire to be distinctive just to be different. I don't even desire to be a Church of Christ Christian. I just want to be a Christian—nothing more and nothing less. We need to stop plastering labels on one another and instead focus on Christ Jesus, for it is He who has made us to be saints—the holy people of a holy God. If our identity and mission are not centered in Christ Jesus, then regardless of the sign in our front yard, we are *not* the Church of Christ.

Look now to verses 3 to 8:

<sup>3</sup>I **thank** my God every time I remember you. <sup>4</sup>In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with **joy** <sup>5</sup>because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, <sup>6</sup>being **confident** of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

<sup>7</sup>It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since **I have you in my heart** and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. <sup>8</sup>God can testify how **I long for all of you** with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Paul's thanksgiving for the Philippian Christians is unqualified and intensely personal. He expresses gratitude, joy, confidence, affection, and longing for all of them. He is grateful for the Philippians' partnership with him in the gospel, a partnership that has most recently shown itself by a material gift brought to Paul by Epaphroditus.

Whatever else may be said, the Philippians were for Paul a cause of great joy. The

mention of joy in v. 4 is the first of sixteen occurrences of this word group in the letter. Joy prevails for Paul even in prison, and he will urge that it prevail for the Philippians as well in their present suffering in the face of opposition. I like Karl Barth's description of "joy" in this context as "a defiant nevertheless." Paul and the Philippians are struggling with trials and tribulations; "nevertheless," they experience and express joy. Joy—it is the defiant "nevertheless" that enables us as Christians to engage and endure the struggles of life.

Personally, I find Paul's prayer to be somewhat of a rebuke of my own prayer life. Paul considers every circumstance as an opportunity to know and to show God's grace; therefore, his first response is thanksgiving and not petition. Too often, our prayers turn into a list of things for which we ask rather than an occasion for thankfulness. Yes, we tend to end our prayers by confessing that God's will be done, but the bulk of the prayer has been spent calling upon God to do our will. Someone has said, "If the only prayer you every say in your life is 'thank you,' that would be sufficient.

Do not fail to notice that since it is Jesus who lives in Paul, it is then Jesus who loves through Paul. Loving others as Jesus loves us is only possible when Jesus is living in us. For if Jesus lives in us, He is then able to love through us.

When Paul in his prayer finally turns to making requests, they are for the Philippians and not for himself. So, let's look at Paul's petition in verses 9 to 11:

<sup>9</sup>And this is my prayer: that your **love** may abound more and more in **knowledge** and depth of **insight**, <sup>10</sup>so that you may be able to **discern** what is best and may be **pure and blameless** for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup>filled with the **fruit of righteousness** that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Here are some specifics regarding the "good work" begun in the Philippians which Paul repeatedly prays God will bring "to completion" on "the day of Christ." Along with ever-increasing love, Paul wants the Philippians to experience ever-increasing knowledge of God and His will and ever-increasing moral insight. Why? So that they might know how to make the best choices possible, and that they themselves might be the best people possible.

In short, Paul's prayer for the Philippians is that they might live the life of the future in the present, so that they might be "blameless" on "the day of Christ." The concern is with the present life in Christ; the orientation of such a life, however, is its consummation

at the coming of Christ. In other words, as Christians, we live for Jesus Christ *now*, and we do so in light of the fact that He is coming back!

Do we, today in 2004, base our hope for the future on what God has done in the past? Or do we think of the future in terms of an escape from this life rather than as a completion of what has already been started? If God is to complete what He has started, isn't it time to let Him begin His work in *your* life?

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