

POSITIVE PRAYING

Phil 1.3-8

Introduction to reading

Last week, we began a new series of studies in Paul's letter to the Philippians; turn to it. Our series has been given the overall title *Living joyfully for Jesus*; and even in the first two introductory verses of the letter, we see Paul revealing some of the secrets of living a joyful Christian life.

- It's to have *the heart of a true servant*; not forever thinking, "What's in this for me?" but continually seeking the glory of Jesus.
- It's also about being *wholly committed to Jesus* as his *saints*, his dedicated ones. There's no joy to be had from half-hearted or lukewarm discipleship.
- Joy comes when we have our *sights set on heaven*, our true home, not wedded to our place on earth, be that *Philippi*, Gateshead or wherever.
- Joy comes as we *promote harmony within a local church*, with the members and leaders acting *together*, one in spirit and purpose.
- And joy comes from appreciating *God's foundation gifts to us*, his *grace and peace*, the bedrock for our Christian lives.

And so this morning, we're moving on to verses 3-8 top look at the very positive way Paul prayed for these believers.

Read: *Phil 1.1-8*

INTRODUCTION

How do we pray for our fellow believers here at Durham Road? I hope we *do* all pray for each other, specifically, by name! It's why we produce our monthly Prayer Diary, to help us pray regularly and systematically for those in the fellowship here.

And in Paul's prayer for the Philippians, we can pick out many pointers to help us in our praying for one another. First, we see that he prays with

1. THANKSGIVING (v3)

I thank my God every time I remember you, he writes in verse 3.

I wonder what sort of a picture you have in your mind's eye of Paul. Some people imagine him to have been a rather stern man, severe even. But here in the opening words of this letter, we see what a warm-hearted kind of person he was. Whenever he thought about the Philippians, to remember them before God in prayer, he heart was filled with thanksgiving for them. He was so grateful for what God had done in their lives.

- I expect he thought back to **Lydia**, his first convert in Philippi – his first convert in what today we call Europe. She had been a God-fearer. Paul had met her at a place of prayer. But for all her praying, it was clear that she knew little about Jesus. She didn't know that Jesus had died for her, personally, so that her sins could be forgiven, so she could be reconciled to the God she was praying to, and so received into his family as an adopted royal daughter.
- Lydia was a dealer in expensive purple cloth, from the town of Thyatira. Purple was the colour of royalty. And when she heard Paul's message about Jesus, the Saviour-King from heaven, Luke tells us that *the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message* (Acts 16.14). She welcomed Jesus into her heart as her Saviour-King. Her whole family became believers at the same time, and were baptised as a sign of their commitment to Jesus. How Paul must have thanked God as he remembered Lydia in his prayers.
- Then there was the **jailer** in Philippi too. He had also been wonderfully converted. He had been on the point of committing suicide, after an earthquake had struck his prison. He feared that all the prisoners had escaped, a capital offence in those days. But just as he was about to fall on his sword (Acts 16.27-34), *Paul shouted out to him, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"* The jailer called for lights, to check that what Paul was saying was true. And when he found that it was, he *rushed in and fell*

trembling before Paul and Silas. "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" he asked. He had heard Paul and Silas singing about Jesus in their prison cells, even though they had been severely beaten and had their feet fastened in stocks. There was something about the joy they were expressing, even in such dire circumstances that must have made a deep impression on this hardened prison officer. He was more used to people cursing and swearing in prison, not singing hymns of praise to God!

- And so Paul said to the jailer, *Trust yourself to Jesus, believe on him, and you will be saved--you and your household.* Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night, the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house, Luke tells us, and set a meal before them; **he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family.** How Paul must have been filled with thanksgiving to God, as he looked back on the amazing conversion of this man.

Paul had happy memories of those early days in Philippi, despite all the hardships he had suffered there. People had been saved, snatched from darkness into God's wonderful light, from pious ignorance to full assurance of faith. And what a contrast these first two converts made: a sophisticated businesswoman, coming to faith in a quiet, unexceptional kind of way; and a rough tough jailer, coming to faith in a most dramatic manner. And it was all the Lord's doing. Only he could have opened the hearts of such people to receive Jesus as their Saviour-King.

I wonder how much time *we* spend in our prayers, thanking God for the people in this fellowship, as we think of their varied journeys to faith. Each one is a miracle of God's grace and mercy. Paul had a wonderful capacity to see the best in other people, and turn what he saw into prayers of thanksgiving to God. It reminds me of the way in which Telegu-speaking Indians greet each other. They put their hands together as if saying a prayer, and utter the word *wandernaloo*, which means 'thank you'. *I thank my God every time I remember you*, Paul writes, by way of an example to us in our prayers for one another.

Next, from verses 4-5, we see that when Paul prayed for the Philippians, he always prayed for them with

2. JOY (vs4-5)

And prayed for them with joy, as he recalled their partnership with him in the Gospel. *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

- The word '*partnership*' here (which is often translated in the New Testament as 'fellowship') means 'shared ownership', or 'joint participation in a common enterprise'. The Philippians weren't simply recipients of God's good news, which had come to them through Paul. They were with him in its further propagation, as every true believer will be.
- What Paul is speaking about here is something *dynamic* on their part, not something static. What he talks about is, literally, their partnership *into* the Gospel. They weren't simply in it with him, as co-believers with him. They were right *into* it with him, as co-workers. And that's what caused him such joy.

Right from the outset, they had shown their commitment to the work of the Gospel in practical ways.

2.1 Practical help: hospitality

- *Lydia* had offered Paul and his companions, hospitality, Luke tells us in Acts 16.15: *If you consider me a believer in the Lord," Lydia had said, "come and stay at my house.* What a help that had been to Paul during his stay in Philippi.
- Then the *jailer* had bathed Paul's wounds, following his severe flogging and time in prison, and had also offered him hospitality.
- These simple gestures must have meant so much to Paul, so far away from home. I know how much our Andrew appreciated the hospitality he received from Christians in Thailand, during his Christmas stay there. Offering another Christian hospitality is an expression of our partnership with them in the Gospel, especially when the other Christian is a missionary, or away from home.

Then from what Paul writes in the rest of this letter, we see three other ways in which the Philippians' partnership in the Gospel expressed itself. The Philippians offered Paul their well-informed

2.2 Prayer support (1.19)

- Glance down to verse 19 of chapter 1. There Paul assures the Philippians that ***through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.*** The Philippians were diligent in their prayer support of Paul; and their support was fuelled by a regular flow of fresh news about Paul, from his associates.
- The Philippians were praying for Paul as a pioneering missionary, intent on pushing back the frontiers of Christ's kingdom. And that's why it is good for us to have ***prayer links*** with people like Tony and Judith Sykes, working in India with BMS World Mission. Partnership in the Gospel can take the form of well-informed prayer support, as well as practical help, like hospitality.

The Philippians' partnership with Paul also involved seconding

2.2 Personnel for his team (2.25)

- Look over to 2.25. Paul writes, *I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also **your messenger, whom you sent** to take care of my needs.*
- Epaphroditus was evidently a member of the church at Philippi, whom they had set aside to be of assistance to Paul in his travels. Now he was on his way back home, because he had fallen ill (v26): *he longs for all of you and is distressed because **you heard he was ill.** Indeed **he was ill, and almost died.** But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.*
- Paul borrows a term from the world of gambling in that last phrase when he speaks about 'risk'. Epaphroditus was someone who had been prepared to 'gamble his life away' - *dicing with death* - not in a reckless, irresponsible way; but for the sake of the Gospel. He was prepared to take the risk of joining Paul's pioneering team, with all the inherent dangers that involved, for the sake of Christ and the furtherance of the Gospel.
- When we last looked at this prayer back in June 2002, I said at the time, "Wouldn't it be good if, in the days to come, small though this fellowship is, you had the joy of commissioning someone to overseas missionary service!" Well, we have had that joy, in seeing Andrew go out to Cuba and then Laos, and Richard to Thailand, not to mention my own visit to India. It's all part of our partnership in the Gospel.
- And I know that as we've sent people out from here, we've sent them with our strong prayer backing.

But perhaps the most notable form the Philippians' partnership in the Gospel took was their generous

2.4 Financial provision (4.15-19) for Paul.

- Turn over to 4.15-19: *as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, **you sent me aid again and again** when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.*
- Paul indicates here that the Philippians were both ***pioneers and perseverers*** when it came to the matter of giving. They were the *first* to think of it, and they *continued* with it right up until the time of writing.
- It reminds us that it is good to get in ***first*** with our giving, not to wait until everyone else is doing it and then catch up! That's what's been so heartening about the giving of this fellowship to IREF's Tsunami appeal. You were the first Church in the UK to think about it, and do something about it. And over

half the money we will be sending out from the UK to India will have come from this fellowship. That's a marvellous expression of our partnership in the Gospel.

- But it's not only good to take the initiative when it comes to supporting the Lord's work. The Philippians are commended for their **repeated help** - *again and again, they sent Paul aid*. It's important for our giving to the Lord's work to be continuous. Missionaries cannot live off fresh air. They live by faith, of course - but adequate money to buy bread is an enormous help to their wellbeing and fruitfulness. This is why it's good for us to give systematically, year by year, to BMS World Mission, and the Baptist Union's Home Mission Fund, to help support the Lord's workers at home and abroad. It's a practical expression of our partnership in the Gospel.
- And as we give, a great bond is forged between the givers and the recipients. Their joy is ours in being able to give to others. And the joy is theirs in receiving what they need. It's what I feel every time I go to India - the tremendous sense of joy the people have there in response to the way we are able to help them financially. A bond of love and joy is being forged by our giving.

And so having prayed with thanksgiving and joy, we see next how Paul always prayed with great

3. CONFIDENCE (v6)

All he could see in the Philippians partnership gave him confidence that the God who had *begun a good work in them would carry it on to completion, right up until the day of Christ's return*.

- The word Paul uses here to describe **the beginning** of God's work in them means to 'inaugurate' something. It was used to describe the official opening of a building. And the tense he uses points to a *decisive and deliberate* act on God's part. We've thought of the contrasting circumstances in which Lydia and the Philippians jailer were brought to faith in Christ. But in both cases, it was God who was at work in their hearts, drawing them to himself.
- Alex Motyer (p43f) makes these comments on this verse: *Our salvation would be a wretchedly unsure thing if it had no other foundation than my having chosen Christ. The human will blows hot and cold. One moment it's firm, but the next moment it can be unstable. In itself, it offers no form of security for us. But it's the will of God that's the ground of our salvation. No-one would be saved had the Lord not been moved by his own spontaneous and unexplained love to chose his people before the world was made; and then at the decisive moment to open our hearts to hear, understand, and accept 'the Word of Truth, the Gospel of our salvation' as Paul puts it in Eph 1.13. This is our confidence; it is God who has willed my salvation, and at the appropriate moment, began his good work in me.*
- Furthermore, he has committed himself to **complete** what he has begun - indeed, to *carry on completing his work, right up until the day of Christ's return*. The idea behind Paul's words is that of an architect putting all the finishing touches to the building he has designed, in readiness for its official opening. In all the ups and downs of our lives, God is working to his master plan, to present us 'perfect in Christ' on the day of his return. *So good news and bad news, unexpected happiness and unforeseen troubles, all have their place in God's providence, to bring us to completion for the day of Christ's return*, writes Alex Motyer. *So concerning all such situations, our faith says, "Without this, I wouldn't be ready for my saviour's return."*
- But ready we will be. The finished article is guaranteed (Motyer, p44f). *It's as if God is under contract to himself, to finish his work by the deadline he has set himself, the day of his Son's return. The Day will eventually come and everything and every one of his people will be ready for Jesus. There will be no last minute rush, no botching up, nothing that will 'do for now', no strikes to delay it or carelessness to mar it. As John puts it in Revelation 21.2, I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem [that's us, Christ's Church], coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.*
- I read these comments this past week in connection with Abraham, whose life we are looking at on Sunday evenings. *Once God has set his love on us, it matters to him what happens to us. We've been chosen and called to be 'to the praise of his glory' (Eph 1.14 tells us). So even when we fail God, he won't fail us. Abraham came to learn that the ultimate guarantee of his own perseverance was not to*

be found in his own faith (which was often weak, and failed him); but in God's superior faithfulness (Stibbs, p30).

- Having begun a good work in our lives, God undertakes to see it through to completion, ready for the return of Jesus.
- That thought helps us in our praying for one another, doesn't it; and especially in our praying for those who seemed to start well, but who then drifted away from the Lord – perhaps members of our own family, or friends we have known. Once God has taken hold of a person's life, he doesn't let go. However far a person may drift away from Jesus, God the Father has a way of drawing such people back to his Son – perhaps through a personal crisis that moves a person to seek God's help for their life; or perhaps through another Christian coming gently alongside them.
- What we can be sure of is that on the day of Christ's return, God will have no follies blighting the landscape, unfinished monuments to unfulfilled dreams.

And so we see finally, from verses 7-8 that Paul prayed with real

4. AFFECTION (vs7-8) for the Philippians.

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

- Regardless of Paul's personal circumstances (he was in prison at the time for preaching the Gospel), here were a group of people who had come to share in God's grace with him. And so a deep bond of affection had been forged with them.
- Paul longed for them with all the affection of Jesus himself, because his heart was beating in tune with Christ's. What Jesus felt about these believers, Paul also felt. And his deep love and affection for them came out in his prayers for them.
- In 2 Cor 5.16, Paul reminds us that we no longer look at anyone from a worldly point of view. We look at other people through the eyes of Jesus, indeed *with* the eyes of Jesus, looking out through us. Our hearts throb to the beat of his.

CONCLUSION

Can we take a leaf out of the way Paul prayed for these Christians, as we commit ourselves to pray for one another here at Durham Road?

Paul's praying for them was

(a) Comprehensive – all-inclusive is perhaps a better way of putting it. In verse 4, he speaks about praying for *all* the Philippians – not just those he knew personally, like Lydia and the jailer and their families. He prayed for those who had subsequently joined the Church through their testimonies, long after he had left the city. Why did he do that? - because he felt this deep affection for them all. Three times in verses 7 and 8 the phrase *all of you* occurs. *It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.* They all shared in God's grace; so Paul longed for them all with Christ's love; and so prayed for them all, whether he knew them personally or not.

- It's how we should be praying for the people on our monthly Prayer Diary. We may not be able to put a face to every name, especially for those who attend our clubs on a Friday night. But that shouldn't prevent us from praying for them all, with the same affection Jesus has for them all.

And I notice too that Paul's praying was

(b) Consistent. He always prayed the same way, regardless of how he was feeling personally, and whatever circumstances he happened to find himself in – in prison, for preaching Jesus, or out and about defending the faith against its critics, as he proclaimed Christ openly. He always prayed the same way for these believers. His prayer life was shaped by his theology, not just his circumstances.

- He always prayed with **thanksgiving**, for the way God had brought these believers to faith.
- He always prayed with **joy**, as he remembered their partnership in the Gospel.
- He always prayed with **confidence**, knowing that it was God who had begun the good work in them, and it was God who would see his project through to completion, ready for the return of Jesus.
- And Paul always prayed out of his deep **affection** for these believers, because he prayed with the heart of Jesus.

I wonder what would happen if we all prayed like Paul prayed – more like he prays here. James reminds us that *the prayers of those made right with God are powerful in their effect.*