

Praying with Joy

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Preacher: Paul Barker

- [0 : 0 0] This is the AM service on Sunday the 6th of April 1997. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker preaching from Philippians 1 verses 1 to 11 and the sermon is entitled Praying with Joy.
- Almighty God, we pray that your word may dwell in our hearts so that on the day of Christ we may be pure and blameless, filled with the fruit of righteousness.
- For we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Few of us would want to be called a religious fanatic.
- I remember when I was at university, my mother writing to me in Sydney saying that she was concerned that I'd become a religious fanatic, that I was taking the God thing too seriously and too strongly.
- Well, I'm not sure whether she still thinks that. It wasn't a little phase that wore off as she hoped, although since then she's become a Christian so she's probably more sympathetic. Well, certainly is.
- [1 : 1 7] But somehow fanaticism seems to be a bit imbalanced. And I think sometimes as Christians we probably relate to St. Paul a bit like that. Oh, he's really a bit of a fanatic, a bit one-eyed.
- And really we're not like that these days. Yes, there's a place for our Christian faith but it's got its place and should be kept in its place. But really we're not quite as fanatic as St. Paul.
- For some of us, perhaps our faith or religion is a bit of an insurance policy, a bit of a taking our cake and eating it too. There's a man that we visited a while back whose name is on our address list, never comes here.
- But he wants his name just kept on the list so that he can have a good funeral. Well, that's hardly religious fanaticism, I suppose. But it's interesting that deadlines make us fanatics.
- If you're studying for the VCE exam and it's looming large in your future, you become all of a sudden channeled and a fanatic about studying and making sure that you use every minute to get it done. Well, hopefully that's the case.
- [2 : 2 1] Or if you've got a sports final that you're working towards. Or if you're getting married in about six weeks' time. All that you can think about is getting married and everything gets channeled in. You become a fanatic about getting married.
- Not that I can think of anyone like that. The Bible recognises that all of us face the deadline of Jesus' second coming.
- And for Paul and every other writer of the New Testament, that's the deadline that should create fanatics of them. Because all that they should be doing should be in readiness and preparation for the day when Jesus returns.
- It should focus the minds. It should focus our actions, our wills and our devotion to God. And in this passage in Philippians 1, the day of Jesus' return, the day of the Lord, looms large in the thinking of St. Paul.

Well, the letter begins as a standard ancient letter. There they didn't put the name of the writer at the end. They put it at the beginning, which is quite a good thing to do really because when you get a letter, you know who it's from.

[3 : 30] You don't sort of read a letter and then discover at the end who it's from, as sometimes is the case. But he begins Paul and Timothy. Timothy was with him, though Paul certainly wrote the letter. Servants of Christ Jesus.

The word literally means slaves. Because in Paul's mind, to be a servant of Christ, to be a Christian, was to place yourself at your master's disposal. To place yourself at the disposal of Christ.

To do what he called, to go where he called. And that was certainly Paul's thinking about being a Christian. And then after the writer comes the addressee. To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi with the bishops and deacons.

Now, if we received a letter here to the saints at Holy Trinity, I wonder whether you'd think, oh, that's for somebody else. That's for the leadership or the ministry or the very holy people at Holy Trinity.

But no, to address a letter to the saints at Philippi is to address a letter to the whole church. For in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, all the people of God are regarded as saints.

[4 : 36] And indeed, in the Bible, there's no separation of an individual as a saint. Whenever the term's used, it's in the plural, talking about the whole church. So our sort of thinking about St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Gregory, St. Hillary, St. David, or St. somebody else, that's not there in the Bible.

But rather, all the people of God are saints. Not just the special people. It's an inclusive term, both Old and New Testaments. It literally means not so much those who live perfectly pure or moral lives, but rather those who are Christians who are therefore set apart for Christ.

And Paul's writing for a particular church in Philippi, in northern Greece, in what's called Macedonia. Now it's a heap of ruins. But then it was an important town, important trading place.

That's why we read the first reading, or the second reading from Acts 16, because it's the account of when Paul actually arrives there, in northern Greece in Philippi. Ten years before he wrote Philippians, he was in Philippi and began the church there.

And in the intervening period, he was there probably twice for very brief periods of time passing through, from southern Greece through northern Greece into Turkey. He also mentions the bishops and the deacons.

[5 : 57] Not so much the people who wear purple shirts and have crosses hanging around their chests, but the bishop was the local overseer of the congregation. In this terminology, in a sense, I would be the bishop of Holy Trinity, because the word literally means overseer, the one who has the responsibility for the care or the supervision of the congregation.

And the deacons would be others within the congregation who have a special role of service, in various practical ways probably, within the life of the congregation. Paul continues, but this time differently to ancient letters.

Rather than the standard greetings, he says, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace which summarize, in a sense, what the Christian life's about.

Grace which comes from God. His free generosity in saving us and establishing us as his people. And peace. Peace here at the beginning of the letter and the peace that will pass all understanding, which Paul concludes this letter with.

Peace is not just the absence of war, but rather the positive recognition of a relationship with God and with God's people. And that comes from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[7 : 10] Because for Paul he recognizes that Jesus is God, as the Father is God. And this derives from both. Paul continues, as he often continued in his letters, to give thanks for and pray for the people to whom he wrote.

Before he gets down to the business of the letter, he always prays for them or gives thanks for them, or both. And Philippians is no exception. And indeed for Paul it seems that the Philippian church held a special place in his heart.

Often, as here, the issues of the letter get their overture in the prayer or the thanksgiving at the beginning of the letter. So the themes of this prayer that are coming out in the next paragraph are actually the themes that Paul will develop at length in the letter to come.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you. Now that's fanatical praying.

If we were to describe our praying, if you're like me, you wouldn't describe it in that way. You might say, I thank my God sometimes when I occasionally remember you, and I occasionally pray with joy, and in some of my prayers I pray for some of you.

[8 : 24] But Paul, you see, is a fanatic. Because he's praying for all of them, all the time, constantly, with joy in every one of his prayers. It doesn't mean that Paul spent his whole life on his knees as though he never got anywhere or did anything else.

But rather it shows that Paul regularly and consistently prayed. And as I say, I think for us that's quite different. The emphasis here is on all. Always, all of you, all the time I pray, Paul is not holding back, I guess, in his prayers.

And no one is left out of them either. For us, I think, when we remember somebody, we think of them. But for Paul, when he remembered the Philippians, he says, whenever I remember you, I give thanks for you and pray for you.

When somebody we know is ill, we often say to them, I'll be thinking of you. But what good's that? What good is thinking of somebody? The only thing that actually accomplishes something is to pray for them.

So let us follow Paul's example. And when we're tempted to say to somebody, I'll be thinking of you, stop and say, I'll be praying for you.

[9 : 37] Because prayer accomplishes something. Thinking doesn't. Not in this context. Prayer does. And that's why Paul prays. Oh, it's a little encouragement, I suppose, to know that somebody's thinking about me, but it doesn't actually do anything for me.

So pray. But of course, if you're going to tell someone you're going to pray for them, make sure you do it. Because there's no point saying, I'm going to pray for you, and then not doing it. That would be lying. So let's pray.

Let's get into the habit of praying. Not thinking. Not remembering. But when somebody comes to our mind, when we think of somebody during the week, stop and say, God, I pray for that person.

That they'll get well. Or I pray that they'll continue in Christian faith. Or they'll grow in Christian faith. Or some of the things we're going to see later on here. So let's try and develop the habit of, whenever something comes to mind, stop and pray.

It doesn't take very long. We can still do it, whatever else we're doing, probably. Unless we're talking to someone. But Paul's not just on about praying here. He's on about giving thanks. Yes, he does pray, and we see the content of his prayer later on.

[10 : 41] But Paul thanks God for the Philippians every time he remembers them. And he prays with joy as an expression of that thanksgiving for the Philippians.

Joy is one of the key themes of this letter. The word occurs many times in all different situations throughout the letter. We must remember that at the time that Paul wrote it, he was in prison, facing a probable death in Rome, and yet he was full of joy, bubbling over with joy.

Joy at the Philippians. And it's not just that he remembers his fond memories of happy times when he was there, but rather he gives thanks and has joy for them because of their Christian stance and gospel ministry.

No doubt, as he remembers 10 years before, he remembers with joy Lydia, the businesswoman, the dealer in purple cloths from the Turkish town of Thyatira, who was converted, first person converted in Philippi, and whose house was then used as the venue for the gathering of Christian people.

No doubt, Paul gave thanks and had joy for her and her faith. And the demon-possessed woman, who is later in the story in Acts, we didn't read that section. Her family made money out of the fact that she had a demon.

[11 : 53] But in the end, Paul cast that demon out and she came to Christian faith. And no doubt, Paul has joy for her too. No doubt, Paul has joy for the jailer. He was thrown into jail because of the confusion and the turmoil that he began in the town of Philippi.

Not unusual for St. Paul. Not unusual for the gospel. And yet that jailer was converted and he and his household were all baptized. And no doubt, 10 years later, Paul had joy for him and for his household as well.

And yes, Philippi was a tough place to be. He was beaten. He was imprisoned. He was kicked out of town. And yet Paul is full of joy for the Philippians. But his joy just doesn't stop at what happened 10 years before.

His joy, we're told in verse 5, is for what continued from 10 years before to the current time. I thank my God and I pray with joy because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

I suspect if their sharing in the gospel had stopped at the first day, that is when Paul was actually in Philippi the first time, he may not have had much joy with the Philippians. But their Christian faith, their ministry in the gospel didn't just end, wasn't like a little flower that just sort of bloomed and then died up and withered, but rather was something that endured and persevered.

[13 : 14] And for 10 years, the Philippian church had been solid supporters and partners with Paul in the ministry of the gospel. We know from other places in Paul's letter to the Philippians some of the things it seems the Philippians were on about.

They worked hard for the gospel. They sent messengers to Paul to encourage him and to receive encouragement from him. They sent gifts of money to support him and to support the churches that were poor in Jerusalem.

And indeed, to some extent, the letter of the Philippians itself is part of Paul's thank you for that gift that they've recently sent. We know that the Philippians themselves were preachers of the gospel.

were encouraging others to become Christians through their preaching. We know also that the Philippians suffered for the gospel and they prayed earnestly for Paul.

They weren't idle Christians leaving ministry to the professionals, but these were people who Paul calls sharers or partners in the gospel. For yes, it's Paul who's doing the ministry travelling and the preaching and now in prison in Rome, but yet for their prayers, their suffering, their preaching, their sending of gifts and messengers, they are full partners in the work of the gospel, active in many ways.

[14 : 32] It's important to see the value of that for all of us. For not every Christian who's called to preach will be a missionary, but yet in many ways the mission in Nigeria that Peter and Elspeth are involved with, Claire in Pakistan, Ted and Morwen in Lee Creek, and Mark and Jenica in Nepal is our ministry, is our missionary work, is our gospel work.

For we are those, I hope, who pray, who send money and gifts to the organisations that support them, who write letters of encouragement, who come to hear them when they come home on furlough, who encourage them in various ways.

And if that's the case, then we are full partners in the gospel and the mission and ministry work that they're involved with. Not only overseas and in the outback either. For we are full members or partners of the gospel here as well.

Not everybody preaches and so on. But by our prayers, our offerings, our giving, our involvement, our fellowship, our suffering even, we are fully partners in the work of the gospel in this place as well.

It's important then that as Christians belonging to a church, we're not idle. But rather we see ourselves as partners in the gospel, in our prayers, in our giving, our suffering, our encouragement and so on.

[15 : 48] But that's not the only reason that Paul gives thanks for the Philippians either. He directs his attention to God and in the end that's the ultimate grounds for giving thanks.

Verse 6 is one of the great verses of the New Testament. The past impressive record of the Philippian church is no guarantee for their future and is no guarantee that they'll persevere in faith either.

Yes, it's a sign of God's work in them. It's evidence that God has begun a work. And Paul's confidence is not because he thinks the Philippians have got strength to continue, but his confidence is in God.

For he knows that if God begins a work, God will bring it to completion. Paul recognises that ultimately as Christians we depend upon Almighty God, not on our own strength, not on our own ability or fortitude or perseverance, but on God who is faithful, who completes what he begins.

Very unlike some people who never finish what they begin. I'm a person who if I start a book I must finish it. No matter how boring or tedious or irrelevant or incomprehensible it is, I'm one of those people who sort of ploughs through it to the end and breathes a sigh of relief if it's been boring.

[17 : 17] A friend of mine in England, she was reading a book called A Suitable Boy. You may have seen it. I doubt you've read it but maybe you have. It's 1500 pages long written by an Indian person.

It's an excellent book. I read it. She read 1200 pages or more and gave up. And I couldn't believe it that she'd read all that 1200 pages of a book and then gave up on the last 200 pages of what a book I thought was very good.

But for many people they start things and never finish them. You might be a person like that. Your garage might be full of unfinished projects or your sewing room full of unfinished ideas and thoughts.

Your bookshelves filled with unfinished books. Your lives filled with unfinished tasks. Like children who begin something and soon lose interest and move on to something else.

Sometimes those sorts of people are very difficult to rely on. I'm still waiting for various things my father promised me 20 years ago. But my heavenly father is faithful and my heavenly father completes what he begins and he can be relied on.

[18 : 25] And that's where Paul is directing the attention of the Philippians here. I am confident of this. Not you Philippians but God. I am confident that God who's begun a work in you which is evidenced by their sharing in ministry and support and so on.

I'm confident that God who's begun that in you will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ. The parable of the sower that Jesus taught was about the seed going in different types of soil.

For some it would just blossom and flourish and then die and be choked. But Paul is confident that the Philippians is good soil and that God is going to bear fruit at the end of time through it.

The completion that he sees the deadline that's facing him is this day of Jesus Christ when Jesus will return. A day for which nobody knows the day or the hour and yet it could be soon or it could be in millions of years.

But Paul's statement here is also a recognition that the Philippians are not yet complete. They can't rest on their laurels. They can't say well look at all the great things we've done. Aren't we good? There's more to do, more to grow and more to become and only God will bring us perfect to that final day.

[19 : 43] Paul recognises that in effect all of life is in preparedness and readiness for the day when Jesus will come again and a ten year record way back in the past isn't going to be sufficient on the day when Jesus returns.

Why should I accept you? I'll look back in the past ten years ago I was very active then. I was very keen then about the gospel. Paul recognises that's insufficient but rather he wants a lifetime to the very end of perseverance in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There's never a situation in our lives where we are unable to be partners in the gospel in some way or other. But though it's God's work ultimately to bring them to that final day it doesn't mean that the Philippians sit back and say well we'll let go and let God as sometimes people say.

It's never a biblical statement but rather if we're to let God we are to keep striving. And so Paul's prayer for them in verses nine to eleven is an expression of what the Philippians ought to be striving towards.

This is my prayer that your love may overflow more and more. Not just overflow but overflow more.

[21 : 01] And not just overflow more but overflow more and more. Paul's talking about boundless love overflowing. There'll never be sufficient or enough love in the Philippians' lives in their expression of love.

So it's to keep on bubbling over flowing over never to be restrained never to be closely or narrowly directed but love that just abounds and flows more and more and more beyond measure.

And not just love for one particular object or one particular person in a narrowly defined way but this is love without object. That is love for God and for neighbour whoever the neighbour is.

Love for the person sitting next to you behind you your family your friends your colleagues your study partners etc. etc. etc. Anybody and everybody and God. That's the love that's overflowing and that Paul is praying for here.

Charles Wesley said the same sort of thing in a prayer that we'll sing later on. Yes that's a prayer like Paul's for boundless love that derives from Jesus Christ that will be in the heart of the Philippians and in our hearts as well overflowing in every way.

[22 : 31] But that love is qualified. Paul doesn't stop his prayer there. He says I pray that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and insight.

He's not talking you see about soppy sentimental love. He's not talking about spoilt child type love that says yes to everything but rather he recognises that true love derives from God.

True love derives from God and from the knowledge of God. Now he's not talking about knowledge of God as in the storing up of facts and figures. He's not encouraging the Philippians to have a vast repertoire of memorised Bible verses and facts about God but rather the knowledge of God is relational.

It's about knowing him as a person. Not about him not facts about him but knowing him personally. And the knowledge of God is also a moral knowledge as well. For knowledge of God means obedience to his will.

It means an ethical standard reflecting God's. So when Paul prays that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight he's talking about a knowledge that is a love which is godly love deriving from God and relationship with God and from insight into his standards and his priorities.

[23 : 55] Often we fail to see the connection here between the knowledge of God and the practical outworking of that in love. We fail if we try to increase our love without increasing our knowledge of God relationally with him and morally.

we don't grow in our faith if we keep on abiding in disobedience to God. I remember I gave a talk in England to a group and a young chap came up to me struggling to believe the resurrection of Jesus and we talked for a long time about it the evidence for it and so on and it seemed on the surface that his was an intellectual problem stopping him having faith and yet always in the discussion I had this nagging feeling that there was something else that was actually blocking him.

I believe that it was an intellectual problem but not at its source. In the end as I discovered it was a moral problem. He was not prepared to change the morality of his life in a particular way and that then led that immorality led to an inability to grow in faith and to grow in relationship with God and ultimately to grow in love.

The truth about God you see is moral truth. It affects the way we behave and live and that's being expressed here in this prayer of St.

Paul that as we increase in knowledge of God we should and we only can increase in our moral living as well and hence the overflowing of love. The purpose of that Paul goes on to say is that you may determine or choose what is best so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.

[25 : 44] To choose what is best is to choose what is vital or what is of really great importance. Paul gives answers to that sort of thing later on in the letter. He says in chapter 2 that you must have this mind among you to be humble like Christ was humble.

Later on he expresses his own opinions of what is best. He says I regard everything as lost because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Later on again he talks about thinking on truth the things that are true and honourable and so on. They're the things that determine what is best. They're the things that are the best. Paul is making a very important point here.

One of the difficulties in my job is that every day I have to choose not to do some things and the difficulty of the choice is not that there are bad things that I choose not to do.

That's easy to decide. The difficulty is that I could spend all my time doing good things. I have to decide somehow what are the best things for me to do which will mean there will be many good things that I don't do.

[26 : 52] All of us as Christians need to get into that sort of thinking. There are many, many, many good things that we can do but somehow we ought to decide what are the best things that we are to do.

Paul recognises that in our relationship with God we'll grow in an appreciation of being able to decide what are the best. Again the idea is that on the day of Christ these Christian people will be pure and blameless.

God's the one who makes them thus and the idea of being pure and blameless is that before the judgment seat of Christ they'll be acquitted, found not guilty, accepted by God.

We know from the Bible that's not because of their own works but rather through Jesus' death they have forgiveness from all their sins and failures and therefore on the day of judgment can stand acquitted by God because of God's mercy.

Verse 11 goes on to say that having produced or being filled with the harvest or the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

[28 : 01] the fruit of righteousness are those things that Paul is exhorting in this letter, the mind of humility, the things of truth, putting Christ first, not arguing amongst themselves in a church.

The things that he says to the Galatians are things like love, joy, peace, patience and kindness and so on. They're the fruit of righteousness. They're the works of God in our lives. They come through Christ Jesus not through our own strength or ability.

Paul's not talking about being able to stand on the day of Christ with self righteousness but rather the righteousness that comes through God himself. When did we last pray for Holy Trinity like this?

When did we last pray for ourselves like this or each other like this? Rather than God bless our church and our ministers, let's pray a prayer like this and my challenge to you is that in the next week, every day, at some point in the day, you read verses 9 to 11 as a prayer for ourselves, a prayer for this church.

This is our prayer for Holy Trinity, that our love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight so that we may determine what is best so that in the day of Christ we may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

[29 : 25] Paul's joy at the Philippians is not because he had nice croquet evenings on Lydia's lawn, not because he spent time at the opera, at the Philippi theatre, but rather his joy at the Philippians is because of their gospel commitment, not just then, but in all the years succeeding as well, their support for his ministry, their convictions about the gospel and truth.

Paul's joy for the Philippians comes because of God, because God is faithful and the work that he's begun in them, Paul is confident he will continue to the day of Christ.

And for Paul he recognises the day of Christ as the deadline, the thing that ought to fix and focus our minds, our actions, our wills and everything about our lives. It ought to make us fanatics for the gospel and we'll see in this letter how Paul is a fanatic and calls us to be as well.

Paul's prayer is that on the day of Christ, at the end of history, whether we are living or have died in between times, we'll be able to stand perfect, pure and blameless.

Charles Wesley's prayer goes on in a similar way to Paul's. Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be. Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee, changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place.

[30 : 52] grace. There we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise. We sing hymn number 217.

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