

## 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

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Preaching

*Pray for preachers who are addressing small congregations in thousands of small churches and chapels across the world. May they feel part of the universal work of God.*

### On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the guiding hand of God on your life
- Pray for Universities and Colleges beginning courses right now
- Pray for South Africa at a time of changing leadership

## Meditation

When we are tired, and our confidence fails,  
Strength fades away, sapping spiritual reserves.

Too quickly, we question the promises You've given,  
Trying to find answers to those besetting problems  
That seized us on the way we thought you led.

In truth, we turned in frailty from Your guidance  
Not realising that in love, You could never let us go.

Hold us firmly, do not let us fall;  
Show us paths we cannot see;  
Hold us carefully, protect our fragility;  
Calm our nerves when touched by fear;  
And speak directly when we need Your voice.

For this is where discipleship counts;  
When in distress, we trust our all to You:  
For this love of Yours is greater than  
All the enemies we meet upon the way.

## Bible Study - Philippians 1:8-11

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

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

## Review

Paul's letter to the Philippians begins with a greeting (1:1,2) and then some words of affection in which Paul speaks of his prayers for the church at Philippi and the sense of fellowship he has with them. This fellowship arose from their common sharing in the Gospel and Christ's call to remain faithful in the face of suffering (1:3-7). Having spoken again of his affection (1:8) Paul goes on to give the details of the prayer he regularly prayed for the Philippian church.

In yesterday's study we saw the value Paul placed on two important things, firstly, 'fellowship' (the unity of sharing in the supreme value of the Gospel of Christ); and 'joy' (a state of peace with God, and not a passing emotion). It is so easy for us to read the New Testament and assume we know what Paul meant by words such as this, but in reality, whatever our English translation, we easily pass over the importance of what Paul says because we are familiar with the words. For example, the unity of our fellowship is a fundamental feature of Christian faith, as is joy. The more we study these important Gospel truths the richer we become in Christ. It does not take special intellect, it just takes care; and the Holy Spirit is always willing to speak the truth of God's Word into our hearts if we spend time with it and treat it as the Lord's special gift to us.

This is especially true of the prayer that Paul prays for the Philippians in our passage today (1:9-11). When you read this prayer, it comes across as a generous appeal, asking that the people of the church might grow in certain good qualities of faith; knowledge and discernment, pure and blameless, and producing the 'fruit of righteousness'. The earnestness of the prayer almost comes across as preaching! In brief, Paul urges the Philippians to excel in these things so that they will enable the Kingdom of God to grow in their midst 'to the praise and glory of God' (1:11)! With little further imagination, most of us could elaborate upon what Paul says to apply them to people or church situations in which we find ourselves today, whether or not we feel able to stand up and preach.

These words, however, contain within them some profound truths of the Gospel, and they yield a great deal more if we look carefully at how they are used in the scripture, as well as their original meaning in the Greek language of the New Testament. Paul's prayer is not a random collection of sentiments, but a prayer which asks that the Philippian church might put into practice the essential truths of the Gospel so that the Lord will be pleased with them when He returns 'on the day of Christ' (1:10). The starting point of Paul's prayer is his request for the church to overflow with love, 'more and more'. This overflowing of love is the most obvious evidence that the Gospel has taken root in people's lives, and Paul adds to this a prayer that this will lead to both a greater knowledge of God's truth and an ability to discern what is right and good. Now if you think of how many churches are torn apart by differences of opinion, then such discernment of the will of God is certainly something to which we should aspire today. Paul's prayer then opens up a whole range of significant issues for the life of the church, of which this is only the beginning.

### ***Going Deeper***

Our task today is therefore to look more closely at Paul's brief opening prayer for the Philippian church, a fellowship to which he felt so close. The prayer starts in verse 9, but the preceding verse 8 leads into it from his previous expressions of affection (1:3-7).

## **Further Study**

### ***Calling God as a witness – verse 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 is secondary to all 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.

The second consequence is 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! Discernment, when described like this, is a really helpful thing, and is something that we would all value, and certainly pray for each other. We can sometimes feel that there are so many good things which need our attention; so many people who need help, so many causes that need assistance or finance, for example. The question each of us has to address, either for ourselves or within the fellowship of the church, is what is it right for us to do? God alone knows how our efforts fit into the great plans He has for the world in which we live.

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 dissension 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. What each of us can do is to assess how we and 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.

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. Paul talks of his regular prayers for the church at Philippi. Have you ever been compelled to pray regularly and in earnest for a church? Why?
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.

### Discipleship

#### Personal comment:

*I have often been led to pray for a church, and 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. None of this will happen however, if we do not love 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 discipleship programme

- *In what way does love flow out of you through the things you do for God and for others? I know this is a sharp question, 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