

A Prayer for our Church

In a drawer in my house are letters and notes that people have written to me through the years. It is nice to be able to go back and re-read nice cards and letters. I hope you have saved some that have meant a lot to you also so you can read them again. I'm sure it gives you a feeling of peace.

This is also something we do as Christians. A significant portion of the New Testament is composed of letters by the Apostle Paul. Paul wrote letters to specific congregations; he didn't have the universal church in mind nor was he thinking about how 21st century people would respond to them.

It is the inspiration of God's Spirit and the specific teaching of those letters that have caused us to still read them to hear guidance for our lives today. Around the year 62, Paul was imprisoned in Rome, and it was from there he wrote to the church in Philippi. Paul had a special relationship with the church in Philippi. Together they had been partners in giving, receiving, working, and rejoicing in what God was doing through them.

Now Paul, their church founder, was in prison facing the threat of death. He hopes to be reunited with them once again, but the chance of that is not looking good. Whether he is with them or not, he writes to encourage them to continue to live out the gospel together in their community. The letter begins with a greeting and then words of thanksgiving. Paul expresses gratitude for his relationship with the church in the past. Then he shares his affection for them in the present. He concludes his thanksgiving with a prayer for the church's future.

Paul begins the letter by pouring out his heart in gratitude to God for all God has done and is continuing to do. Paul's prayer begins with thanksgiving, not with asking for anything. In circumstances that could understandably breed doubt, despair, even bitterness, Paul remembers all God has done and all he has experienced, and he is grateful.

The depth of Paul's faith and his approach are inspiring. He is trying to assure close friends who are worried about his being in prison and facing death that he has not been robbed of his joy.

When Paul and Silas first came to Philippi they were arrested, beaten, and thrown into prison. Their response to that adversity was to pray, sing hymns, and to witness to those who came to faith. They were bold about their faith and sought to be an encouragement to others rather than complaining about their own situation.

Paul's imprisonment then and at present helps to advance the gospel. Being in prison did not stop Paul nor the gospel, just as it failed to crush but, in some ways, served as a breeding place for greater influence and impact.

Paul, focusing on God's grace, the good news of the gospel, and giving thanks, we can experience joy and contentment even during difficult circumstances.

Paul is confident that God was with him and the Philippians in the beginning of their ministry together, and God will be with them to the end, even to the day of Jesus Christ's return. Paul can believe that even the most difficult moments can be transformed by God's grace.

It all begins with thanksgiving, like Paul does, and it is good advice for our prayers individually and as a church. By reminding ourselves first of the gift of God's grace and the good news of Jesus, we're constantly reminded of our reasons for thankfulness. Paul is thankful as he remembers the church with joy and confidence, and he longs for them with the affection or compassion of Christ, with a love that is more than human affection.

How about us? Do we remember and pray for other Christians? We are perhaps most likely to pray for others when they are in need, but there are other types of prayer. Paul knew the Philippians were praying for him and it meant a lot. We all need people praying for us just like Paul did.

What if we prayed during the week for the congregants, groups and events meeting at some point in the week at church – who knows how God might use our prayers to transform lives?

In our prayers for other Christians, how much time do we spend as Paul does, thankfully remembering them in joy, confidence and in love? This is an area we can all probably grow in. Praying for others with thanksgiving is both good for the relationship and for strengthening faith. Prayer truly can provide peace to a life filled with all of life's tribulations.

Paul was able to remember and give thanks for the church this way because they had expressed their commitment to the Lord and to each other by sharing in the work of the gospel through their prayers, mutual ministry, and their generous giving. They labored and fellowshiped together to further the gospel and through the work they've shared God has drawn them closer together.

Is there someone you could write or call and tell them you're praying for them with thanksgiving for how they have shared in your life? How does it feel to receive a call or a card, email, or letter like that? It's like pulling into a gas station on the emotional road of life and having our tank filled and then the attendant who filled our tank says, "It's on us; have a great day." And we drive out with a smile on our face, the radio turned up louder, our heart a bit lighter, and we are ready to keep going down the road of life.

We need these emotional pit stops even more than our cars need gas – which is why we react differently to a card that is personally addressed to us from a friend.

We live in an age of entitlement, of increased and often highly unrealistic expectations, a time when cynicism, negativity, rudeness, and anger are a part of everyday life. This is so much the case that sometimes even Christians who are in situations far more comfortable than a Roman prison have difficulty expressing themselves or their opinions in ways that are

appropriately respectful, humble, considerate, appreciative, kind, and thankful.

That is the danger of writing something down, it preserves whatever was said and our mood or emotional state at the time for anyone to see. This kind of correspondence is like someone letting the air out of our tires or putting a small hole in our emotional fuel tank – it drains us and slows us down.

Paul begins with thanksgiving and helps the church to feel encouraged and loved before he expresses anything else. Whenever we're going to share any kind of suggestion or comment with someone that may involve possible improvements or changes, we think need to be considered in their work, behavior, or in a relationship – following Paul's example is wise.

Begin with thanksgiving – specific, tangible, honest thanksgiving and then share with humility for their consideration what might make it even better. All of us are far more willing to listen when spoken to in this way, yet often we fail to speak that way ourselves.

Paul begins with thanksgiving for his past relationship with the church and then assures them of his great affection for all of them in the present. Did you notice how frequently Paul used the word “all” when speaking of his relationship with the church?

Paul's apparent need to convince the church that he was praying for all of them; that he thought of all of them with the love of Jesus; that he held them all in his heart; that he longed for all of them – seems to indicate there was a problem within the church.

We don't know the specifics of all the problems causing the sense of division within the church, but we know from elsewhere in the letter that people are disagreeing with each other, and Paul is urging people to have the same humble mind as Jesus and assuring them of his affection. Paul knew it's always hard when someone we love dies, but there is some

solace to be taken if we have let our feelings be known and if we have not held back words of thanks. People need to hear that we care for them.

Finally, Paul shares a prayer of intercession for the future. Paul prays that the Philippians will grow and mature in love. Not a love that is sentimental and easy; not a love that shrinks from truth-telling and tough engagement; but a love that is joined to knowledge and understanding, to probing and discerning, to putting itself to the test in real-life situations and loving even when it's difficult.

Prayerful love combined with knowledge and discernment enables us to determine what is best. For those of us who have lost loved ones this year, the first Christmas can be difficult. Some of us will have an empty chair at our table because of the loss of a loved one, but maybe this year it would be good for all of us to place an empty chair at our tables to remember both our own loved ones as well as the many families who are grieving and finding it hard to give thanks.

But as we look at that empty chair, may we rejoice at the life or lives that touched ours in special ways and may we look around the table to see those who are still present and sharing their love and life with us. Paul didn't know if he would ever have the opportunity to be with the Philippians again so he prays that their "love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best." This is not a bad prayer for us to pray for our loved ones as well.

Paul begins his letter to the Philippians, which was the next best thing to being there, by telling them:

Give thanks and remember God's grace and mercy in the past.

Give thanks for love and ministry that is shared at present.

Pray for continued growth in love and knowledge so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." Amen