

Text: Phil 1.1-10
St Stephen's

Dec 6, 2009
Advent 2/Sun

'Pray First, Pray Often'

We are in the season of **Advent** today, a word that means 'coming'. In our readings and our worship we are reminded of **someone who came**, and who promised to **come back**, and come back **soon**.

These first weeks we are paying attention to the prayers of the Apostle Paul in our lessons. The promised **return of Jesus** was such an **overwhelming reality** to Paul, that it put him on his knees again and again in prayer.

Last week I said that we are **not such good pray-ers** these days, and I think that is because we are such **activists**. What I meant by that is that we see something that is wrong in the world. Something that isn't the way it should be. So what do we do? Well, we think that it is up to us, so we do something!! And here is what we don't do. We don't pray! Because **we don't think prayer does anything!**

I remember **an alarmed wife** in one of the churches I pastored coming to me. When I offered to visit and pray for her seriously ill and hospitalized husband, she said, '*Oh no, has it come to that?!!*'

You know what she was saying. She was saying-

- I have a serious, urgent problem here.
- We have to do something!
- But nothing more can be done
- So we might as well pray, because that won't do anything either.

Prayer was **a sign** to her of **despair** not hope, of **defeat** not victory, of weakness not of power, of failure not solutions.

Last week, though, I said that prayer is **one of the great powers** of the Kingdom of God that has been given to us. And so it was Paul's habit to pray **first** - not last, to pray **often** ('night and day' was his phrase), and to pray with **confident faith** in the risen Lord Jesus, who stands at the door,

ready to step in. When we look at his prayer in the **first chapter of his letter to the Philippians**, we see exactly that pattern.

Just to refresh your memory, **Paul's second missionary journey** started about 20 years after Jesus was raised and lasted about 3 years. The **Phillipian church** was planted in the middle of that journey...



At the upper left of this map, Paul has crossed the Aegean Sea heading northwest **into the continent of Europe**. There he came to the Roman colony of Philippi, where he led a businesswoman named **Lydia** to faith in Christ. Her household became the center for gospel missions throughout the region and from that ministry the Phillipian church was launched, and they became dear and trusted **partners** to the Apostle. They loved him and he loved them. They stood by him, supported him, and celebrated with him. And they suffered with him.

Now, a bit over **a decade later**, Paul is **in prison** in Rome, where from his confinement he writes **the 'prison epistles'**, three of the most loved letters of the NT: Ephesians, Colossians and Philipians.

In each of the three letters he **starts with prayer**. That's **his habit**: pray first, and keep praying. And in each of the three...

1. He Starts With Thanksgiving

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

Phil 1.3-5

Paul's prayers for people are filled with **thanksgivings**. He does it **all the time**, (look at the words *'all', 'always', 'every'*) – and don't miss the *'you all'*. He thanks God all the time **for people**, because people are more important than anything else.

I got a call late **Thursday night** from a young man who was my oldest son's best friend during his high school years at QV. 5 years ago he was married here, and then he and his wife moved into the city. I haven't heard from him since then, till I got this call. He was frightened and worried. This is a phone camera picture of their son, Harper...



This little 14 month old boy was down in Children's Hospital, and they were facing a test the next day to see if he had **leukemia**. Pretty frightening. I went down to visit with them and pray for little Harper. It was a wonderful time, even in a frightening time. Turns out that Harper's dad some weeks ago felt like he had **gotten a bit lost** and had actually prayed about needing some help **to reconnect** with God and **the important matters** of life. And then Harper got really sick and now he was flat out afraid. I'm not sure I have the theology behind all this straightened out, but it **rocked this dad's world** and **God used it**, profoundly. I'm clear about that. What mattered rose to the top. What didn't matter dropped away. By the time we got to Sat AM, the test for leukemia had come back **negative** and they had diagnosed a bone infection that is being treated with antibiotics. Little Harper is already perking up, and Mom and Dad have had very moving encounter with God.

Paul rarely asks God for **things** in his prayers. His prayer focus is **people**. Because people are far more important than things. And when he prays for people, and thanks God for people, he has a particular focus...

I thank my God... because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

Phil 1.3-5

This would be one of the major themes of his letter to them, and it was cause for thanksgiving. Partnership to Paul means they...

- Joined him in receiving the gospel
- Joined him in passing on the gospel
- Joined him in supporting the gospel
- Joined him in living the gospel
- Joined him in suffering for the gospel

So Paul thanked God for them. Remember – from a prison cell

It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

Phil 1.7

Together they **stood under God's grace**, and it is a large umbrella. Receiving the gospel was grace, and so was supporting the gospel and living the gospel and even suffering for the gospel. All grace, God's grace poured upon them.

That said something important to Paul about his fellow Christians: they were under God's grace, so they belonged to Christ, not to him. That was his decided view of Christians. **They were Christ's**, and so his first word is not a word of correction or instruction or education, but a profound and heartfelt **prayer of thanksgiving**.

I want to stop for a minute and **thank God for you**, too... In my 15th year of pastoral labor among you, I count you as one of the greatest blessings in the years of my life, and I am sure I speak for our other

pastors as well. I thank God for your partnership and friendship and support all these years, for your patience and compassion for me and for my family. I give thanks for your love of the Gospel, for your trust in the bible, and your willingness to face opposition and even take difficult and risky stands for things that matter. It is a gift to serve among you.

2. He Prays for 'Abounding' Love

God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus... And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more

Phil 1.8-9

Sitting in Rome, confined by chains, Paul writes of his love. He actually writes of **three loves that are knotted together**. There is **his own love**, the love of a pastor for his people, that has grown into a longing for them. There is **Christ's own compassion** for them, the love of the savior for the saved. What a wonderful phrase to describe Christ's love for us, '*tender compassion*!' And there is **their own love**, and Paul's prayer that it may abound. These three loves are **intertwined**, knotted together in a living vine of love.

The **central stem** of the vine is Christ's own tender compassion. What is true is that Christ's tender compassion is **infectious**. (H1N1) It **can be caught** by proximity, by closeness, by touch, by word, or at a distance by a love letter like this – and **by prayer**. Christ's tender compassion can be spread by prayer.

Here's **how the infection spreads**: a Christian reaches out to you, cares for you, befriends you, comes to you in an hour of fear and failure, and brings you the gospel – their love becomes something that touches you deeply and it isn't too long before you realize that it was **Christ's own tender compassion that touched** you, and a new love starts to grow in you. His love **grows by infection**, by proximity, by closeness, by touch, by word, or at a distance by a love letter like this – and **by prayer**. So Paul prays that their love would abound; he prays first and prays often.

3. He Prays for Christlike Character

I pray... that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return.

Phil 1.9-10

Last week we talked about our modern blindness to the gospel's call to holiness of life. I said that many evangelicals believe only part of the gospel, a reduced gospel that talks about...

- Christ's Forgiveness for our Past
- Christ's Hope for our Future

But has nothing to say about Christ's transformation for our today's. **You can't leave out Christ's power to change your today's.**

Paul's prayers over and over again naturally move in this direction. He prays that we will grow in knowledge and understanding...

'For I want you to understand what really matters...'

Why?

so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return.

Here is what he is asking God to do. **Grow their knowledge** – which means not primarily their head knowledge about God, but even more their knowledge that grows from their relationship with God, from their years of walking with him, drawing close to him, trusting him, and serving him. Paul prays that **this knowledge** would **grow their understanding**, their wisdom, so they would **know what really matters**, what really counts in life. That's worth knowing! My young friends at children's hospital learned what matters this week – and what doesn't. **What matters** is people. All of them matter. And Christ's tender compassion for people. Abounding! And the work of the gospel of grace in people, bringing forgiveness and healing and holiness and love and hope.

Those things trump everything else. Paul calls this, *'the good work'*.
*And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you,
will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when
Christ Jesus returns.*

Phil 1.6

And so Paul prays. To some people prayer might be a sign of despair and defeat. But not to Paul. And not to us. Not while we pray to this God, the real God, and to his risen son. Believing prayer to the risen Jesus Christ is one of the great powers of the Kingdom of God, and I suspect, that on the great day when everything is revealed we will find that much more was accomplished by this kind of prayer that was ever accomplished by all our prayerless efforts combined.

That's why Paul prays first, and prays often.