



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

A Prayer for Eternity

Philippians 1.9–11

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Introduction

In his book, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, George Hunter tells about the effort that changed pagan Ireland to a nation with Christian principles in an amazingly short period of time. As Hunter tells it, the movement lost momentum and ceased evangelizing because the Roman Church, which had originally endorsed the effort, demanded that the Celtic churches adopt all the ways of the Romans with regard to church structure, practice, tradition, and politics (Hunter 2000, 39–41).

Hunter's primary interest in the book is in what the Celts did to reach a pagan culture where people had attitudes similar to what we find in our postmodern world. He shows how the missionaries led their converts to a way of faith that embraced all of life—especially how to deal with accidents, misfortune, problems other people can cause us, and unexpected troubles that come along.

He illustrates the all-of-life outlook with how the missionaries taught the converts about prayer. In what students of the period call “contemplative prayer,” they were not taught that prayer was for set times and meetings. Nor were they taught “the more usual petitionary approach that ‘requests God to do specific things.’” The kinds of prayer they learned were “the opposite of controlling prayer.” Rather, prayer was to be “an ongoing, or very frequent, opening of the heart to ... God, often while engaging in each of the many experiences that fill a day.” Specifically, “the Celtic Christians learned prayers to accompany getting up in the morning, for dressing, for starting the morning fire, for bathing or washing clothes or dishes, for ‘smoothing’ the fire at day’s end, and for going to bed at night” (Hunter 2000, 32–33; citations within quotations are from Ray Simpson’s *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*). These were not trivial, self-serving prayers, as the following prayer for starting the morning fire illustrates:

I will kindle my fire this morning,
In presence of the holy angles [sic] of heaven,

God, kindle Thou in my heart within
 A flame of love to my neighbor,
 To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all,
 To the brave, to the knave, to the thrall.... (Hunter 2000, 33).

Whatever else we might say, it is clear they were called to focus on life's ultimate priorities. Their prayers were concerned with real life, but they were not laundry lists of requests that called on God to perform for them.

I illustrate with the Celts because our text is also different from how many think about prayer. Paul often offered petitions for others that sometimes dealt with affliction and related concerns (cf. Phil 1.26–27; 2 Cor 12.7–8; Jas 5.14–15). But as our text shows, his prayers at times reflected a higher and deeper matters that go beyond the temporal concerns that can preoccupy us. When we read his prayers, we see his priorities and a model for what ours should be. It's helpful, therefore, to study the three stages of what we can call his *prayer for eternity*.

Praying for Overflowing Love

“And this I pray, that your love may overflow still more and more ...” (v. 9 NASB).

The NASB correctly reflects the present tense verb in the first phrase: “And this I pray” (καὶ τοῦτο προσεύχομαι, *kai touto proseuchomai*). As is generally true in the New Testament, the kind of love he prays for is ἀγάπη (*agape*). His petition is not that the Philippians will begin to love, but that they will experience ever-increasing love. He does not indicate whether he has in mind love for God or for people.

He emphasizes his desire with the verb *overflow* and the repetition of the adverb *more*. The verb is περισσεύω (*perisseuō*), to “be above or beyond in number, amount, or quality” (Danker 2009, 281). Paul uses the verb twenty-six times (cf. Phil 1.26; 4.12, 18), referring to “the element of excess and fullness that overflows the set bounds” (O’Brien 1991, 75). To add emphasis in Philippians 1.9, he repeats the adverb (μᾶλλον, *mallon*), “accentuat[ing] their need for unremitting progress” (Rogers & Rogers 1998, 449). This action is both contingent and progressive (*perisseuō* is a present subjunctive verb), expressing Paul’s desire for them to continue to overflow in love.

The nature of the growth he hopes for is expressed with the words *knowledge* and *discernment*. Knowledge translates ἐπίγνωσις (*epignōsis*), a word Paul typically uses to focus on religious or moral things, a consciousness of sin, but also knowledge of God and Christ (O’Brien 1991, 75–76; cf. Eph 1.17; Col 1.9–10; Phlm 6). His use echoes the Old Testament idea where knowing God

meant to be in close personal relationship with him because he had made himself known. There was the element of an obedient and grateful acknowledgment of his deeds on behalf of his people. The knowledge of God began with a fear of him, was linked with his demands, and often was described as knowing his will. In the OT, as well as in the writings of Paul, knowledge was not a fixed *quantum* but rather something that developed in the life of people as they were obedient (O’Brien 1991, 76).

Discernment, or insight (NIV), translates αἴσθησις (*aisthēsis*) and in the New Testament is used only in Philippians 1.9. It does appear twenty-seven times in the LXX, twenty-two of them in

Proverbs where it refers to “that practical understanding which is keenly aware of the circumstances of an action, manifesting itself particularly in discretion of speech (Pr. 5:2; 14:7; 15:7)” (O’Brien 1991, 77). Rogers and Rogers elaborate that it “was originally used of sense perception, but is applicable to the inner world of sensibility, referring to moral and spiritual perception related to practical applications. It refers to the ability to make proper moral decisions in the midst of a vast array of differing and difficult choices” (Rogers & Rogers 1998, 449).

Praying for Testing and Approval for Ultimate Concerns

“To help you determine what is best ...” (v. 10 NRSV).

The love for which Paul prayed that was characterized by the proper application of the knowledge of God’s way was designed to equip the Philippians to understand what ultimately matters in life. The goal of the petition in verse 10 is delineated by the preposition εἰς (*eis*), translated “so that” (ESV, NIV) or “to” (NRSV).

The traits described in verse 9 were designed to enable them to examine and test their lives in light of the excellence, purity, and blamelessness that would prepare them for the day of Christ. “Approve” (δοκιμάζω, *dokimazō*), derived from the idea of testing metals “to see if they be pure” (Liddell & Scott 1996, ¶ 14,566), meant “to evaluate significance or worth” (Danker 2009, 100). “Excellent” (διαφέρω, *diapherō*), which primarily meant “to carry something through,” was used to refer to the idea of causing something to be moved from one place to another, and so came to mean “to be unlike, differ, be different from someone or something” (Bauer 2000, 239). Paul used it in verse 10 to stress the idea of quality. We can thus translate verse 10 as follows: “so that as you keep testing [life’s options] you can learn the things that really matter” (the latter from the REB).

Why it is important to do that is revealed in the last part of verse 10 where Paul says it is only by that kind of testing that the character traits are developed which get us ready for the judgment (note the use of ἵνα, *hina*). These include sincerity (NASB; εἰλικρινής, *eilikrinēs*) and blamelessness (ἀπρόσκοπος, *aproskopos*), that is, to be without fault, not give offense (Bauer 2000, 125). Only in this way would they be prepared “for the day of Christ” (cf. Phil 1.6; 1 Cor 1.7–8; Col 1.12; 1 Thess 3.13; 2 Thess 1.11–12). To summarize, “Paul’s prayer indeed spanned the present age, but its aim was that the Philippians would not only *reach* the final day, but also that they might *be pleasing* to God on the occasion of the great assize” (O’Brien 1991, 79).

Praying in Light of Receiving Righteousness through Christ

“Having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ ...” (v. 11 NASB)

“Having been filled” translates the perfect participle form of πληρόω (*plēroō*), to fill, make full, bring to completion (Danker 2009, 287). In verse 11, the completion envisioned is the fruitful harvest of people who are living righteous lives, with “righteous” used in the sense of ethical qualities like those listed in Galatians 5.22–23 (O’Brien 1991, 80). Notice that the goal (*eis*) is “for the glory of God,” a phrase that points back to the idea of thanking God at the beginning

of Paul's prayer in verse 3. Secondly, the goal is to receive God's "praise" (ἔπαινος, *epainos*), a word having to do with approval or recognition (cf. Rom 2.29; Phil 4.8; Eph 1.6, 12, 14).

Notice that righteousness and its effects come about "through Jesus Christ." With this phrase, Paul "emphasizes that such a crop can only be given and produced through Jesus Christ. The stress is thus laid on the practical outworkings of their spiritual growth and turns their minds from any notions of self-effort to total dependence on Jesus Christ" (O'Brien 1991, 81).

Conclusion

As we look back on Paul's prayer, we are impressed with how marvelous, intriguing, and thought-provoking it is: (1) It shows the esteem and depth of feeling Paul had for the Philippians; one doesn't pray such a prayer for people for whom he has no such feelings. (2) It shows several things that we will see more clearly as we continue to study the epistle: priorities and the key to holding on in face of trouble and learning to work through their differences. (3) It also shows the heart of the apostle—what motivated him, "made him tick," and his priorities and ultimate concerns.

The last idea is especially important since, as someone has observed, one can tell a person's focus by what he or she prays for. Thus, we have here a preview of other texts in Philippians wherein Paul holds up Jesus, himself, and Timothy and Epaphroditus as models of the right priorities and service.

All well and good, but as we reflect on this prayer, what do we see about ourselves? What do our prayers reveal about our focus? Are we concerned first with knowing God? With growing more and more in God's love? With learning what really matters so we can make the right choices when faced with challenges and temptations? If not, what do we need to change?¹

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Works Cited

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Notes

¹ While working on this presentation, someone forwarded me a blog post that included a prayer written by Thomas Merton. Emulating its thoughts might be a good starting place to pray prayers that are not like Paul's: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I

cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”