

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Praying for the Church: Philippians 1:9-11

It's not always easy to know how we should pray for the church – especially, perhaps, in times of difficulty. What needs do we express to God? What priorities top the list of requests? What things should I pray for? In our most honest moments, many of us admit that we struggle in this area of discipleship more than any other.

Those of us who'd like help with prayer can find it in Scripture. The Bible records many different prayers by God's people: think of Abraham, Moses, Nehemiah, Daniel, even Jesus himself, for instance. The Book of Psalms contains prayers reflecting all moods and states of mind, from deepest delight to darkest despair: look carefully, and you'll find yours there! God in his wisdom has given us prayers in the Bible, which we can use and make our own.

A number of times in his letters, for instance, Paul prays for the churches he writes to. It's worth reading them carefully. *What* things does he ask God for? *Why* does he ask for those things? What does he hope will happen as a result of his prayers?

In fact, it's not just a useful tip to reflect on prayers in the Bible; it's *important* to do so. As we pray the prayers of Scripture, we pray more in line with the Bible; we see as important what it sees as important; its priorities become our priorities; it moves us from our *felt* needs to our *real* needs; the Bible shapes our requests; it shapes the way we pray. When we're praying for the church, let's start with Paul, and see where that leads.

In Philippians 1:4, Paul has already said that whenever he prays for them he does so with joy and thanksgiving; now he gives the *content* of his prayer for them in 1:9-11. There are five things we should notice:

1. Abounding in love (1:9a)

First of all, Paul prays that their love would 'abound more and more', that they would continually grow in love. He doesn't say here whether it's love for *God* or for *each other* or for *outsiders*, but a little later (in 2:2), he speaks about love for each other, and that's probably in mind here too. He's not saying they lack love; the point is that they *are* loving each other, and he wants them to do so 'more and more'. That's where he starts: love. And it's a great place to start. Above all else, as a church, let's pray that our love would grow more and more. It's not that we don't love already, for we do know genuine Christian love among and between us; but we need to pray, perhaps now of all times, that we will 'abound' in love. But there's more...

2. Deepening in insight (1:9b)

This love is to be coupled with 'knowledge and depth of insight'. The phrase 'depth of insight' refers to the kind of understanding we perhaps associate with wisdom more than knowledge. It shows us that Paul is not talking about *intellectual* knowledge; he's not praying that the Philippians will know more about chemistry or engineering or 19th-century English literature. Or even theology. He's concerned about growth in knowledge of God and depth of insight.

But here's a key thing: this knowledge and wisdom arise out of *love*. So, love here is not the sentimental, slushy thing we sometimes think of when we think of love. We tend to think of love as having to do with emotion and passion, not *knowledge* and *wisdom*. In fact, we sometimes speak about love being blind! But for Paul, knowledge and love go together. We become people who abound in love, and that love leads to knowledge, wisdom and insight. Genuine Christian love works its way out in knowledge and wisdom.

This means that wisdom and love are not separable things in our Christian experience. Paul would not really understand what we mean when we say, 'Such-and-such a person is really insightful and wise, but not very loving', or 'So-and so is very loving, but they're not terribly switched on when it comes to moral understanding'. No, growth in one area leads to growth in the other area.

That's what Paul prays for the church. What a great thing to pray for! When was the last time we prayed that our love would 'abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight'? As we move forward as a church, let's pray not just for love, but for love in knowledge and wisdom. But why should we pray this? Paul gives the purpose of his prayer in the next verse...

3. Discerning the best (1:10a)

He prays this way because he wants the Philippians to be 'able discern what is best'. Abounding love leads to knowledge and insight which leads to an ability to test what is good and worthwhile.

Wise love results in moral discernment. The Philippians lived, as we live, in a world where it is often difficult to see what the right thing to do is. There are many decisions we face where there isn't a straightforward issue of deciding between right and wrong: whether it be what type of car insurance to buy, or what school to send the kids to. What we need is *discernment* to decide the differences between two or more things, and then make the wisest possible choice. But the choices we make are bound up with our entire value system and priorities.

We face such choices every day – when it comes to what we do with our time, what we read, what we watch, and how we spend our money. Behind all these are choices about what to do, where there are not necessarily just good and bad choices, but good choices and *better* choices, any maybe even *best* choices. But if our love is abounding more and more, and if that love is shaped by knowledge and wisdom, then we are more likely to make wise choices, because they will spring from lives

which are being constantly transformed by God's love and wisdom.

And if that's true for individuals, it's true for the church too. What should we do now? Where should we focus our interest? What should we devote our time and energy to? Should we be doing any evangelism? Should we dig ourselves in and build ourselves up? What can we do *ourselves*? What might we need *outside help* for? We are going to need discernment.

As we move forward, let's pray that our love may abound more and more in depth of knowledge so that we can distinguish between what's passable and what's excellent, what's acceptable and what's best. But there's a further result of this prayer...

4. Pure in hope (1:10b)

Paul prays so that the Philippians 'may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ'. This links back to what he said earlier about being complete at the coming of Christ (1:6). A result of this prayer is that we will live now in such a way that shows we are moving towards that final day. This way of abounding love, deepening wisdom, and discerning insight will result in us approaching the coming day of the Lord with confidence. As a church, we need to be praying that we will be being prepared for our ultimate end and hope in Christ. But there's still more!

5. Filled with fruit (1:11a)

Paul prays that the church will be 'filled with the fruit of righteousness' (a phrase which describes the kind of behaviour God expects of his people). But even this has nothing to do with how great we are, because such righteousness is made possible only by Jesus himself (1:11b).

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Paul ends with the ultimate goal, in the final part of 1:11: that this will happen to 'the glory and praise of God'. Let's pray the prayer for church; let's remember that God has begun a good work in us, and what he has begun, he will complete.