

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Mr. Gordon Kell

## Prayer for Discerning Love - Philippians 1:9-11

The prayer of Paul in Philippians 1 is very short. Yet the thoughts conveyed in it demonstrate the affection the apostle had for his friends at Philippi. It was friendship characterised by prayerfulness.

Paul's relationship with the Philippians began in Acts 16. The apostle was on his second missionary journey accompanied by Silas. Paul visited the churches intending to go on into Asia. But, in Acts 16, the Holy Spirit forbade him to continue on the route he had chosen. So he changed course and attempted to go into Bithynia. Again the Spirit prevented Paul and his companions. Then, at Troas, Paul had a vision in which a man of Macedonia pleaded with him to "Come over and help us." The vision assured Paul of the direction God wanted him to go in and so he entered Europe with the Gospel. This morning we can thank God for the day the Gospel was preached in our continent and ultimately in our country. That journey into Europe began at Philippi.

And how did the Gospel make progress? By a quiet riverside where prayer meetings were held. Through Paul's ministry, God opened the heart of Lydia. Later, as Paul and Silas went day by day to pray, a demon possessed slave girl identified them as "servants of the Most High God". Eventually Paul freed the heart of the slave girl by the power of the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned. What did they do in the prison? They prayed and praised together. The events that followed led to the salvation of the Philippian jailer.

Paul and Silas' experiences at Philippi show us, first, how the Spirit of God would always direct into the place God wants us to be. Then, how God confirms His direction, as He did with the conversion of Lydia. They also show us how we often find ourselves in conflict when we do God's will, just as Paul and Silas found themselves in conflict with the slave owners and city authorities because they acted for the good of other human beings. And, finally, they show us how God can make us more than conquerors in the midst of adversity. Paul and Silas not only rejoiced in spite of great suffering but the love they expressed and message they shared conquered the hard heart of the jailer. In each of these situations it was prayer that preceded blessing.

Some ten years after that first visit, Paul finds himself in prison once more. From his prison he writes to the Philippian church. "Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:1-2).

It is no surprise that this beautiful letter emphasises the great themes of Paul's first visit to Philippi. These themes include joy, fellowship, life in Christ and, of course, prayer.

Joy is woven throughout the chapters this letter. Paul writes in chapter 1

- "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice" (verse 18).
- "I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith" (verse 25).

In chapter 2:

- "Fulfil my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind" (verse 2).
- "Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me" (verses 17-18).
- "Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful. Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem" (verses 28-29).

In Chapter 3:

- "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord" (verse 1).

In Chapter 4:

- “Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved” (verse 1).
- “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!” (verse 4).
- “But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity” (verse 10).

As the Philippians read these words they would remember the joy of their salvation, like the jailer who rejoiced with his entire house. And they would have remembered the joyful spirits of Paul and his dear friend, Silas. What about us? Does that same joy permeate our lives? It was Augustine who said, “The Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot.”

If joy is a key theme of Paul in this letter, so is fellowship. In 1:5, he writes about the Philippians' fellowship in the Gospel, “For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.” In 2:1, he writes about the fellowship of the Spirit. “Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy.” In 3:10, he writes about the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death.” Finally, in 4:15, he writes about the fellowship of giving, “Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared (or had fellowship) with me concerning giving and receiving but you only.”

This fellowship began in Lydia's house, continued in the Philippian jailer's house and then remained constant ever since.

But Paul's greatest theme in his letter to the Philippians is Christ himself. We can title the four chapters of Philippians in the following way;

Chapter 1 - **The Life of Christ** “For to me to live is Christ...” (verse 21)

Chapter 2 - **The Mind of Christ** “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus...” (verse 5)

Chapter 3 - **The Knowledge of Christ** “That I may know Him...” (verse 10), and

Chapter 4 - **The Strength of Christ** “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (verse 13)

Chapter 1 begins with servants and saints. “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:1-2).

Then Paul goes on to write about the life of Christ in the believer. Paul remembers with thanksgiving the history of the Philippian saints and assures them of his prayers: “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;” (Philippians 1:3-6).

There are three things Paul brings before us in these verses. First, the life the Philippians had in Christ had a beginning, it commenced. Secondly, this life had continued. Finally, it was a life which Jesus Himself would complete.

Paul then describes the love that characterises the life of Christ they now shared in Christ, “Just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ” (verses 7-8). Paul leaves the Philippians in no doubt as to the depth of his love for them. Even though Paul could be forgiven for being concerned about his own needs at such a time, he is anxious to convey his desire for the well being of his fellow believers. It is a Christ like example.

This desire leads him to the following prayer: “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” (Philippians 1:9-11)

Paul's prayer begins with a request that their love may abound. His experience of the Philippians' love for him was very real. When he first visited Philippi, he had not only seen God's love at work in opening Lydia's heart but he had been the recipient of the love she so quickly expressed by inviting the apostle into her home. Even more profound was the way in which God's love had been demonstrated towards the Philippian jailer. This man had not the slightest

indication of concern for his bruised prisoners as he fastened their feet in the stocks and left them bleeding in the darkness of the deepest prison cell. Yet it was God's love that brought him from the brink of suicide and the darkness of his own soul to transform him into the gentlest of men. So we read of him, "And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptised. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household." (Acts 16:33-34)

It was this love that Paul wanted to abound - the love of God transmitted through the lives of His people. Paul had known it in his own experience; he had seen it in action in the lives of others and believed it to be of the greatest importance. It begs the question: How has God's love affected us? How has it changed us? Does it abound in us?

Paul not only prayed, that the Philippians' love might abound yet more and more but that it might do this in knowledge and in all discernment. Knowledge is here, I think, the knowledge of God. The more we know God the more His love abounds in us. God is love, therefore to increase in the knowledge of God is to increase in the love of God. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, his face shone because he had been in the presence of God. Many years ago a Christian visited a town and was asked to teach some children in a Sunday School. He explained to the children what Jesus was like. When he had finished, one of the youngsters said to him, "That man lives near me". He later discovered the person the child was talking about was a well-known local Christian whose communion with Christ was demonstrated in this likeness to Christ. In the words of Philippians 2:13, he lived out his salvation.

Paul also prays for "all discernment", that is a moral sensitivity. Today it is easy to become morally insensitive, to think that wrongdoing does not matter. We only have to look at the effects wrongdoing has - the lives it damages; how it undermines our society; the harm it causes at all levels. The Christian is responsible to live a life consistent with the life of Christ. This is not easy but that is no excuse for lowering the standards Christ has set for us. We are to judge sin in ourselves and, by the word of God and the Spirit of God, we are to seek the power to live lives that demonstrate we are the disciples of Christ.

Paul then goes on to write about approving those things that are excellent. We can compare what he writes about here with what he writes in chapter 4: "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy - meditate on these things" (verse 8). Here Paul encourages the Philippians to be occupied with what is good. Too often these days we are constantly bombarded with things that are untrue, ignoble, unjust, impure, ugly and have a bad report. Paul's words are very challenging. What do we digest in a moral sense? What books do we read, what films do we watch, what things do we imagine, how do we speak and act? So often, for example, we gossip about the faults of others. Hebrews 11 gives us an insight into how God thinks. In recording the lives of many Old Testament saints, He highlights only the good things they did. During a cabinet meeting of Clement Atlee's government, one of the cabinet ministers renowned for his bad temper stormed out of the room. The prime minister said he was his own worst enemy to which another minister replied, "Not whilst I'm alive". It may be that cabinet ministers can be enemies but it is not a relationship Christians are to have. Once a Christian was asked what he thought about a particularly difficult fellow Christian whom few others had a good word to say about. He replied, "He has a very nice wife!" It is ours always to seek the good in others in spite of the temptation and, sometimes with bad reason, to see the bad. By living in this way we demonstrate the excellence and value of doing good.

Paul also prayed that the Philippians might be sincere and without offence. The concept of sincerity is to test each of our motives to see if they are worthy of the Lord. "Without offence" means to act in a way that does not offend others. In the words of Paul in Acts 24:16, "I myself always strive to have a conscience without offence toward God and men." It is a good thing to examine our motives and to consider how our behaviour affects others. Sometimes we excuse rudeness by explaining that we "tell it as it is." In my experience, people who speak their mind are the most sensitive when someone tells them exactly what they think. It is human nature to find fault in others whilst pardoning ourselves. Paul encourages us in Philippians 2 to have the mind of Christ, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (verses 5-8).

This character of life is to be continued until "the day of Christ". "The day of Christ" is that period of time which begins with the rapture described in John 14:3 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16 when Christ returns for His Church. It continues until Christ returns in glory with His saints to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. In this letter it is described as "the day of Christ" in this verse and 2:16, and as "the day of Jesus Christ" in 1:10. It is also described as "the day of the Lord Jesus" in 1 Corinthians 5:5, 2 Corinthians 1:14. "The day of our Lord Jesus Christ" 1 Corinthians 1:8, and, in 1 Corinthians 3:13 and 2 Peter 1:19 it is called "the day".

It is during this period that we have the judgement seat of Christ when Christians will give account of their service. This is described in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."

Finally, Paul prays that the Philippians might be "filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." He seems to have in view the judgement seat of Christ and desires that the Philippians might stand before that seat filled with the fruits of righteousness.

In John 15 Jesus pictures Himself as the true vine and His disciples as branches. He wants us to bear fruit, to bear more fruit and to bear much fruit: "Every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:2-5). He adds to this in verse 8, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

This fruitfulness is an illustration of the work of the Spirit in the lives of believers described in Galatians 5:22-23, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law." These are the characteristics that glorify God in our lives.

Paul knew the Philippians' love. He had seen the joy they enjoyed and the peace they experienced. He had witnessed their longsuffering, faithfulness and sacrifice through self-control. He had been a recipient of their goodness and gentleness. What Paul saw in them was to the glory and praise of God. Their lives once filled only by material wealth in the case of Lydia, once enslaved like the young girl and once hard and dark like the Philippian jailer, now shone "as lights in the world" and bore testimony to the work of God's grace. Paul's great prayer was that they might continue to shine till the Day of Christ. In the words of Peter, "until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19).

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