

# Week One: Joyful Prayer



## *Philippians 1:1-11*

“Constantly praying with joy in every one of  
my prayers for all of you.”

—Philippians 1:4

I don't know when, but at some point in my past, prayer became a chore. My earliest memories of prayer involve my parents kneeling with me beside my bed, teaching me prayers like “Now I lay me down to sleep” and The Lord's Prayer before I climbed into bed and fell asleep. These are pleasant, fond memories, so I do not think praying seemed like a chore then.

My next memories of prayer also involve going to sleep at night. At this stage, my parents did not accompany me. I was old enough to prepare myself for bed. Before going to my room, I would find my parents and tell them good night. Often they sent me to bed with reminders to wash my face, brush my teeth, and say my prayers. I think this is when I began to view saying prayers as a chore, just one item on a checklist to complete before climbing under the covers.

I knew not washing my face would leave me dirty and could cause my face to breakout. My mother and my doctor, who had taken lots of time to explain this issue to me, would be disappointed if I did not wash my face. I knew not brushing my teeth could cause cavities. My dentist would be disappointed, and my father would be unhappy with the increased bill at the dentist's office. So what would happen if I did not pray? Would God be disappointed? Would God tell my parents? (Yes, I was more afraid of my parents learning about my negligence than God. I had discovered God was quicker to forgive and to forget than my parents.) This problem was too complex for a tired little boy to solve. So, I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and said my prayers. Most nights I tried to do all three anyway. (Please do not tell my parents.) Some nights I did not pray. Other nights,

I prayed but with all the enthusiasm of someone taking out the trash for the third time in the same week.

As I got older, this bedtime prayer attitude filtered into other times of prayer: prayer before meals, prayer in worship, prayer during my morning devotional reading. I did not stop praying. I did not think prayer a waste of time or unimportant. I merely viewed prayer as something that had to be done, like cutting the grass or cleaning the house. Prayer was routine, a duty. I missed any sense of joy in prayer.

Then I found Paul's prayer at the beginning of Philip-  
pians. Most of Paul's letters begin with a prayer or at least a report of prayer for the congregation addressed. This prayer report is part of Paul's routine, a discipline of Paul's writing style. We expect it in his correspondence. Paul thanks God that people all around the world talk about the faith of the Romans. (See Romans 1:8.) He thanks God that the Corinthians receive grace. (See 1 Corinthians 1:4.) He gives thanks for the hope and steadfastness of the Thessalonians. (See 1 Thessalonians 1:3.) Only in his letter to the Galatians does Paul drop this habit of reporting on his prayers of thanksgiving for the congregation. Paul's expression of constant joy in his prayer for the Philippians strikes me (1:4). I wonder how Paul kept his routine of praying for his congregations

from becoming a burden. How, amid the practice of disciplined prayer, did Paul maintain a sense of joy? What is the source of joy in his prayers for these Philippians?

### *Seeing One Another in Christ*

I first thought that perhaps Paul prays for the Philippians so joyfully because they were terrific people. Paul writes in part to thank them for supporting his ministry with financial gifts (4:18). Giving thanks for gifts has never bored me. Maybe Paul was happy about their financial support. Perhaps the Philippians are better Christians than the ones Paul encountered in Corinth or Thessalonica.

The further I read in the letter, the more I realized that Paul does not say the Philippians are perfect or even better than other Christians. He prays that they continue to grow and mature in Christ. He realizes they suffer from human limitations and are as prone to arguments, divisions, and disagreements (4:2-3) as members of any other congregation. The roots of Paul's joy run deeper than who the Philippians are in and of themselves or what they do for Paul. From the first verse of the letter, Paul indicates that to whom the Philippians belong is more important than who they are. Paul's joy arises from recognizing them "in Christ Jesus."

Paul commonly greets congregations by reminding them that he is an apostle. He addresses the Philippians as a slave in Christ Jesus. The New Revised Standard Version translates the word *douloi* as “servants” here, though it translates the same word as “slave” in 2:7 when referring to Jesus. Paul connects the status that he and Timothy share with the state Jesus enters as described in chapter 2. Christ shapes their living.

In Hellenistic culture, the status of an enslaved person was derived from the status of the owner. It was not just a matter of being a slave; it was a question of whose slave you were. When self-identifying as a slave, Paul attaches himself to the highest person, Jesus Christ (2:9-11). Christ, exalted above every other name in heaven and earth, forms the foundation of his identity. When Paul writes that he and Timothy are slaves in Christ Jesus, his point of emphasis lies in being “in Christ Jesus.” Paul uses this phrase to describe a common relationship that he, Timothy, and the Philippians share, the status of being “in Christ Jesus.” Their common relationship with Christ establishes a relationship with one another. Sharing in Christ Jesus forms the foundation of his joyful prayer.

Paul addresses the Philippians as “saints” in Christ Jesus. The quality of saint is not unique to this congregation. Paul

addresses many of his letters to the “saints” in a certain city. *Hagiois*—“saints,” or more literally, “holy ones”—was a common greeting among early Christians. Paul’s use of the word *saints* need not evoke images of stained glass heroes or miracle-working figures. Paul does not think of the Philippians in an exalted state while he and Timothy share the lowly state of being slaves in Christ. Paul focuses not on the persons identified as saints but on the source of their sainthood: We are made saints in Christ Jesus. Paul is aware of shortcomings and struggles among these people. However, Christ calls them, and this calling makes them holy. As Karl Barth observes, “Holy people are unholy people” who have been claimed by God for God’s purposes.<sup>1</sup> We encounter such holiness in Exodus 19 when God calls Israel holy because of its covenant relationship with God. At the heart of holiness or saintliness in the Bible, we find the idea of being in relationship with God and of letting this relationship shape our lives.

When I lose sight of who I am and who other people are “in Christ Jesus,” my prayers focus on shortcomings I see in others, things that may annoy me about them or ways they do not measure up to my standards of who I think they ought to be. I see myself as better than or more than them. My intercessions become pleas for God to fix

whatever I think is wrong with others, while my confessions sound more like the Pharisee in Luke 18:11, “God I thank you that I am not like. . . .” My prayers become rote recitations of illnesses, sins, my “to-do” list for God to fix. Sanctimonious ramblings make prayer a joyless discipline. Such prayer loses sight of God’s grace working for good in our lives and the lives of those around us. Paul enters prayer by focusing on who we are in Christ Jesus. Beginning prayer like Paul turns it into a joyful discovery of what God is doing in our midst. Prayer becomes a joyful thanksgiving for how God works in the world.

### *Sharing in the Gospel*

Paul gives thanks for how the Philippians have lived out this common relationship they have in Christ by “sharing in the gospel” (1:5). He remembers when they began this sharing and is thankful that it has continued into the present. *Koinonia*, the word translated “sharing” here, also appears in 1:7, 2:1, 3:10, 4:14. Paul talks of sharing in grace, suffering, work, and money. Most English translations of the New Testament render *koinonia* as “fellowship.” Fred Craddock points out that *fellowship* may not be the best translation anymore: “For the church today to announce a

meeting for the purpose of fellowship is in essence to promise all attending that there will be no serious business, no worship, no work.”<sup>2</sup> That is, we use the word *fellowship* to mean, “nothing important will happen here.”

For Paul, fellowship is the gospel working itself out in our lives. Fellowship is about with whom we associate and what we try to accomplish together, how, and under what conditions. Paul believes these matters go to the heart of Christian living. Sharing together expresses our common identity as being “in Christ Jesus.” Fellowship is not optional in Paul’s theology; it is not something in which we choose whether to participate. To be in Christ Jesus is to be connected to everyone who is in Christ Jesus. Even in times of struggle and persecution, fellowship moves us to joyful intercession for each other, as Christ prays for his disciples before his betrayal. (See John 17.)

A few years ago, a friend shared with me the Ecumenical Prayer Cycle, a resource set up by the World Council of Churches that assigns countries to a given week in the year. Each week includes a brief description of the countries listed on the prayer cycle and information about what is happening in churches within these countries. Needs for prayer in each country and prayers from churches in some of the countries are included each week.<sup>3</sup> Incorporating



this cycle in my prayer time reminds me of the church universal, the common bond that we share with others united with Christ throughout the world. Many of these prayers joyfully express the good God is doing in these lands. Some of these Christians live and pray in situations where their faith in Christ puts their lives in danger, yet their prayers often express joyful participation in the work of the gospel. This discipline of praying for and with Christians around the world is a joyful celebration of our sharing together in Christ.

### *Confidence in God*

Paul understands sharing together in the gospel as a sign of God at work in the Philippians. They have not achieved fellowship in Christ on their own. Recognizing God at work in the Philippians leads Paul to confident intercession for them. Like the psalmist, Paul is convinced that God's faithfulness in the past gives us hope for the future. He believes that the same God who called creation into being and raised Christ from the dead will not give up on the Philippians but will bring them to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Paul's joyful, constant prayer occurs while he is in prison. We do not expect to hear reports of joyful prayer

from someone bound in chains for preaching the gospel. Just as Paul's joy is not based on what gifts he receives from the Philippians, neither is it rooted in his circumstances. Paul prays with joy not because he is on vacation at some resort. No, Paul prays joyfully for what God is doing in and through the Philippians while he is confined and persecuted. His viewing them in Christ Jesus allows Paul to be confident about what God will do among them, even though the Philippians also experience adverse circumstances.

Paul's thanksgiving for what God has done in the Philippians and his confidence that God is not done with them move him to intercede on their behalf. He expresses his confidence that God will cause them to grow in love until they can choose to act in ways that bring glory to God. So his intercession looks toward doxology, living for the glory of God.

Once I recognized Paul's pattern of moving from thanksgiving through intercession to doxology, I tried it in my own prayer life. I took the directory of the church I served at the time. Each day I prayed over five members in our congregation. With each name, I would find something in the person's life for which to give thanks and then would pray for God to continue to work in that person. Doing so was not always easy, but my prayers became more joyful.

Some names I did not recognize. I saw names that reminded me of conflicts or disagreements I had with members. But I was determined to pray with joy for all of them. Praying with joy did not mean that I would agree with everything about the person, what had been said or done, or even what the person thought about me. Joy at this point meant being able to find some sign that God was working in the person's life. I had to get to know some members better so I could find what God was doing in their lives. I saw my work like that of a detective; I searched for signs of how God had worked and was working in the lives of these people. I learned to spend more time listening in my prayers for what God might try to tell me about these people instead of telling God what I wanted to be sure God heard about them. Most importantly, I looked forward to this practice of prayer. I could not wait to see what names were next and what God might be doing in the lives of other members of the congregation.

It took me months of praying over five names every morning to work through the list. "God, thanks for what you have done in the life of . . . and for what you continue to do." My prayer was patterned and routine, but it led me to wonder at the mystery of God at work in our lives. I began each day joyfully anticipating this time in prayer. While I

found different things in each person's past and present life for which to give thanks, I followed Paul's lead and offered a similar prayer for our common future of doxological living.

### *The Joy of Disciplined Prayer*

Paul convinced me that many of my prayers are too anthropological. My prayers too easily go straight to intercessions or to confessions, things I want God to correct in other people or in me. Paul begins his prayer by giving thanks for what God has done, is doing, and will do among the Philippians. Petitions, intercessions, and confession are vital parts of prayer, but they are not the only parts. When our prayers focus only on human need and shortcomings, we lose our sense of awe and wonder at what God is doing in the world. Paul's letters follow a pattern: offering thanksgiving to God, addressing certain circumstances or issues in the church, and then closing with a doxology, a praise of God. Paul's letters became a pattern for my own prayer life: thanksgiving, intercession, confession, and praise. Paul's pattern of beginning and ending with attention on God helped me reframe my petitions for myself and others in light of who we are in God. I have found more at which to wonder in praise and more things for which to give God

thanks. Paul's words have given a more theological framework to my prayers.

My focus on human need without a theological framework of giving thanks and praise to God may have led to the lack of joy in my prayers. If our prayers focus only on human need and suffering, they easily become patterned around the same lists of hurts we want mended and failures we want rectified. When we surround our intercessions with thanksgiving for things God has already done and awe at who God is, they take on confidence and joy even in adverse situations.

Harvey Cox ends his book *A Feast of Fools* with a description of prayer as “disciplined fantasy.” He describes thanksgiving as an act of play, as joy over something that has happened. He compares intercession to putting ourselves in someone else's situation. He defines penitence as imagining that we are not determined by our past. Cox calls this “disciplined fantasy” because these acts of prayer go against what we often take as common sense, as the way things are and the way things have to be. The term *fantasy* does not imply that thanksgiving, intercession, and penitence are made up through our brain power or wishful thinking. Part of the discipline comes from learning the stories of our faith, the way God has acted in the past and our

hope for God's future. Cox believes that the resources of our faith and the discipline of structured practices of faith keep us looking and working toward God's future: "When the structure of a prayer is provided by ritual themes and historical images the prayer is a bridge to the future. It produces action toward a goal. It is not an escape from the world but the first step in its recreation."<sup>4</sup>

Paul taught me such "disciplined fantasy" through his joyful prayer for the Philippians. I looked forward to my time in prayer and did not dread it as a useful but dull routine. Paul helped me bridge a divide that had cut through my practice of prayer. I had struggled to claim my freedom and ability to form my prayers as I felt led and moved to do so, a style we call extemporaneous prayer. A problem arose: When I did not feel some pressing need or concern, I skipped my prayers or would find myself running through a familiar litany of prayer concerns. On the other hand, I was afraid using prayers out of a prayer book or fixed forms of prayer would begin to feel rote. Paul taught me a routine, a form of prayer that allowed flexibility and freedom. The form of moving from thanksgiving through petitions to doxology did not limit how I prayed for individuals or expressed praise to God. Having a form increased my sense of freedom in prayer.

In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster reminds us that joy is the keynote of all spiritual disciplines.<sup>5</sup> When we

hear *spiritual disciplines*, we tend to think of forced practices meant to remove any sense of freedom and laughter from our lives. But when we practice discipline in our lives, we find a new sense of freedom from forces that once locked our spirits in resignation to “the way things are” and a sense of hopelessness. The joy of discipline moves us forward with hope. I discovered this hope through Paul’s joyful prayer for the Philippians.

Perhaps during this season of Lent you could embark on an experiment with a new prayer discipline. You could adopt a form for your daily prayers similar to the one Paul uses for the Philippians. If you do not normally use a prayer book, try the practice of praying daily offices from a resource like the Book of Common Prayer or *Celtic Daily Prayers*.<sup>6</sup> The *Didache*, an early church manual, exhorted Christians to pray the Lord’s Prayer three times a day. Perhaps you could reclaim this ancient prayer practice. Since the days of the early church, Christians have found strength and guidance in the discipline of prayer by praying through the Psalms. The Book of Common Prayer has a table of daily psalm readings that allows you to pray through the Psalms in a month. Use this season of Lent as a time to explore some of the joys of prayer that you may not have used previously or have forgotten about over the years. May this season of Lent be a time when you “constantly pray with joy” (Phil. 1:4).

## DAILY SCRIPTURE READINGS

Romans 1:1-15	⋮	Psalm 2
1 Corinthians 1:1-9	⋮	Psalm 11
1 Thessalonians 1	⋮	Psalm 125

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1) Have you ever felt your prayers were dull, routine, a chore? If so, how did you pray during this time? What resources helped you or sustained your practice of prayer in this season?
- 2) What pattern helps structure your daily prayers like the pattern of thanksgiving, intercession, confession, and doxology that I shared? How does your prayer pattern provide a balance to order your thoughts and freedom of expression?
- 3) What new prayer disciplines are you incorporating as part of your observance of Lent? How has this new practice been difficult and uncomfortable? How has it produced joy and freedom in your prayer time?
- 4) What similarities and differences do you see in Paul's beginning to Philippians and the other letters listed in the daily scripture readings?
- 5) Which psalms do you find helpful in times of doubt, hurt, suffering, or persecution?