



Central Peninsula Church

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Philippians 1:3-11
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What Prayer Does

SERIES: Philippians: A People and A Place Transformed by the Gospel

About 60 years ago a preacher ended one of his sermons with a prayer that's now become famous. This is his prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference." Some years later another man, I don't think he was a preacher, recorded a similar but less famous prayer. He prayed: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to hide the bodies of those people I had to kill because they ticked me off."

These two prayers are different, yet both of them make the same assumption: that prayer does something. Have you ever thought about this?

All of us in this room are dealing with life. We're all seeking to deal with the good stuff and the bad stuff that we face each day. And one of the ways that many of us are trying to deal with life is through doing a good bit of praying. Do we know why we're doing this?

I mean, what happens when we pray? What does prayer do? Why is the Bible full of thousands of prayers and why in the Bible do we find God, hundreds upon hundreds of times, commanding his people to pray? What's the big deal with prayer? What does prayer do?

The apostle Paul knew the answer to this question. Paul had a well thought out theology and philosophy of prayer. That's why Paul began most of his letters with a prayer. He understood what prayer does. He understood that prayer does something powerful, both on the human side of things and on the divine side of things.

So when Paul wrote his letters and sent his emails he didn't just write "dear so and so" and then get down to business. In his letters, before addressing urgent matters of church life, Paul saw fit to first pray. For Paul, getting down to business meant getting down to pray. As Paul dealt with life, he knew that only through prayer could a certain, essential work get done. And I wonder if we are as in touch with this reality as we ought to be—knowing that a certain, essential work can get done, in our lives and in our world, only through prayer.

Here, in just the second sentence of his letter to the Christians at Philippi, Paul gets to work with a prayer. We remember from last week that the church at Philippi is now ten years old. It's a church that began with Lydia the businesswoman, the anonymous slave

girl, and the blue collar jailer. It's a diverse church of Asians, Greeks, and Romans. It's a church of wealthy people, middle class people, and poor people. It's a church of intellectual people who read lots of books and it's a church full of experience-oriented people who like to talk about how God "touched" them and "spoke" to them, and so on. It's a church that sounds a lot like our church. In Philippians 1:3-11 we encounter Paul's ancient prayer for Central Philippian Church. And this prayer for the 1st century CPC is also a prayer for us, the 21st century CPC. We too need this prayer.

We need this prayer because it gives us a model and it gives us an answer. Paul's prayer is a model for how we ought to pray. Yet even more importantly, this prayer gives us an answer. It answers the question that even those of us who've been praying for many years may not have a good answer to: "what does prayer do?"

So let's get cracking on this question. Please grab your Bibles and turn them to Philippians 1:3-11.

"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. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. 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. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

In these verses Paul models five critical components of prayer. And through exploring these five components we'll discover the answer to our question: what does prayer do? What does prayer do for us and what does it do for God?

I. 1:3-5 The First Component of Prayer: Habit.

The first component of prayer that Paul models for us is in verses 3-5: **habit**. Whether we know it or not, all of us operate with some sort of a prayer habit. You cannot not have a prayer habit. Some of us have good prayer habits and some of us have bad prayer habits. Some of us pray regularly, while some of us pray rarely. Some of us pray with joy, while some of us pray only because we feel like we should.

Before we go any further let me just confess that I'm preaching just as much to myself as I am to all of you this morning. As I've been preparing this sermon, as I've been soaking myself in this prayer, I've been convicted, as I have been for some time now, that my own habit of prayer needs a growth spurt. And this is ridiculous because prayer is part of my job description. When I was hired here at CPC I was given a page long job description. But that long list could be summarized as just a few basic tasks—the core things a pastor is supposed to do: show up, study the Word, teach the Word, love people, and pray.

Now, I love to pray. It's my joy to pray regularly for my family, for this church, and especially for the twenties of this church. But compared to Paul, I'm a toddler in the school of prayer. And I think this is because Paul had a much better grasp than I do of what exactly prayer does. Paul understood prayer and so his habit was to pray often, to pray with joy, and to let the gospel, not his circumstances, shape his prayers.

Look at verses 3 and 4. Paul's habit is to pray on a very regular basis. The Philippian church is always on Paul's mind. And when someone or something is on Paul's mind, he doesn't worry about it; he prays about it. Imagine if you lived like that. Do you know how different your stress levels would be if this was your habit? Paul's habit is to live out what he will later command in 4:6 of this letter when he tells the church to not worry about anything, but to instead pray about everything. This is just how Paul operates. When something weighs upon Paul's mind, he prays about it.

And Paul had a lot of stress that weighed on his mind. He was planting and overseeing dozens of churches, he was in and out of prison, he was abandoned and betrayed by many of his friends, he was getting stoned, he was shipwrecked, and when he wasn't doing that he was busy writin' Bible. Yet Paul cultivated a habit that whenever the stuff of life, the stress of life, came to mind, he prayed about it. Prayer wasn't so much the prescription that fixed Paul's stress, stress became the ignition that got Paul praying. Paul was a man with a healthy prayer habit because he turned his stress into prayer. We need to follow Paul's model. We need to turn the stresses and responsibilities

of our lives into the ignition, into kindling, for prayer.

In verse 4 we also see that Paul's habit is to pray with joy. This is the first of 16 references to joy in this letter. Only the Psalms and the book of Isaiah discuss joy more than Philippians.

Now I want you to know that Paul's prayers always provide clues to later topics in his letters. Paul's prayers are often the table of contents to his letters. In this prayer Paul mentions a host of topics that he'll later discuss at length in this letter. We don't realize it, but we do this too. Our prayers often foreshadow the topics we plan to talk about. It's dinner time, your son's sitting at the table, you've been meaning to talk to your son about his attitude and his grades, so how do you pray? "God, thank you for this meal we're about to eat. Thank you for my son John. Be with him. Help his attitude. Help his grades. Help him to snap out of it! Amen." If you listen closely to people's prayers, you'll learn a lot about what's important to a person and what they plan to talk about.

Listening to Paul pray, we learn that joy is important to him and that he plans to talk about it. Paul prays what he is to later preach: the Christian life, whether in prayer or in relationships or work or whatever, is a life of joy. Before preaching joy, Paul prays with joy. Joy begins with prayer. I've never known a joyful person who wasn't first a prayerful person.

Paul has this habit of praying for the Philippians with joy because the Philippians are his gospel partners. From day one of their relationship the Philippians have always been there for Paul. Paul doesn't refer to any of his other churches as his partners. Paul reprimands the Galatian church because they'd sold out on him and on the gospel. But Paul says to the Philippians: "thanks for sticking with me, thanks for sticking with the gospel, thanks for being my gospel partners."

Over the course of 10 years three unlikely Philippian converts have now turned into a whole church of gospel partners. Remember, Paul traveled to Philippi in the first place because he believed that God called him there for a singular purpose. Remember from last week, what was that purpose? To preach the gospel. Paul went to Philippi to announce the good news: that Jesus is king over Philippi, not Caesar, not Zeus, not any of the false gods that were being worshipped in this city. Jesus is King. But this king is different. Before this king ever sat on a throne, he hung on a cross. He hung where we should've hung. In Philippi, three very different people believed and were changed by this message.

And ten years later, these people, and many many others, remain partners in this message.

The word “partnership” here is the Greek word “koinonia” which is usually translated as “fellowship.” When you and I think of fellowship we think of coffee and polite chit chat after church. We think of nice comments about the weather and the pastor’s sermon while we drink lukewarm decaf in styrofoam cups. When Paul thought of “fellowship” he thought of partners who were on a mission to change the world with the gospel of King Jesus.

See, the gospel is what makes Paul a man who prays with joy. Paul’s suffering in prison, but his joy is tied up not with his circumstances, but with his gospel partners. Paul is in chains, but the gospel is not and so he prays on this particular morning, just like he does every morning, with joy. This is his habit. What’s your habit? Are your prayers shaped more by what you feel to be true (your shifting circumstances), or more by what you know to be true (the unchanging gospel of King Jesus)?

II. 1:6 The Second Component of Prayer: Promise.

The second component of prayer that Paul models for us is **promise**. We dare to pray to the Almighty God of the Universe only because he’s made promises to us. We can enjoy the privilege of talking to God only because he’s promised to listen. Were it not for the gracious promises of God, our prayers would accomplish nothing. They’d be a waste of time. But our God is a God who makes and keeps promises.

One pastor has said that the whole Bible can be best understood as a book about promises. The Old Testament is a book about promises made. The New Testament is a book about promises kept. Paul prays the way he does, with such confidence, because he believes this. Paul actually believes that God has made and keeps promises.

Look at verse 6. This prayer is built upon the promise that “he [God] who began a good work in you [the Philippians] will bring it to completion...” This is the great promise of the whole Bible: God is faithful. God comes through.

Paul’s prayer is constructed around this promise. This whole prayer leans back upon the promise that God finishes what he starts. So often you and I never finish what we start. We take up jogging, we tell our kids or friends we’ll start spending more time with them, we get a gym membership, we take on a new project, whatever, but so often we don’t come through. We fail to finish. God is different. God always finishes what he starts.

How many of you have quit keeping your new year’s resolutions? God keeps his resolutions. God started our salvation, he started a good work in us through the cross and through our conversion, and he will finish this

good work.

God has it scheduled that “at the day of Christ Jesus” he will finish the good work he’s begun in you, in me, and in our church. Praise him for that! Praise God that it’s not up to us. Praise God that he both starts and finishes our salvation.

I love the feeling of crossing a big project off of my to-do list. I loved crossing “write sermon” off of my to-do list this week. It was a great feeling. Do you know that one day God will cross off from his to-do list: “sanctify Justin Buzzard,” “finish the good work I began at CPC in 1967,” and “bring to completion the work I began in Philippi in the year 50 AD”? We don’t get to cross these items off of our list. These items are on God’s to-do list. And on the day that God takes his pen and crosses these items off his list, he will get all the glory.

As I’ve prepared this sermon, I’ve been so encouraged by this promise. Philippians 1:6 has been seeping its way into me. It’s been changing me. And I keep thinking about how all my non-Christian friends are searching for a promise like this. Our world is groping around in the dark, searching for a promise, searching for some sort of assurance that there will be a happy ending to their story. Friends, we can tell our neighbors that there can be a happy ending to their story. We can tell our neighbors about Philippians 1:6: that all who repent and let God begin a good work in them are promised a happy ending.

Paul soaks his prayers in promises. Paul teaches us that Christian prayer is to be soaked in biblical promises, promises that reveal our need for a promise maker and keeper. We break promises. But God doesn’t. God’s a promise keeper. Wouldn’t it be great if we followed Paul’s example and every time we talked to God one of his promises was on our lips?

III. 1:7-8 The Third Component of Prayer: Passion.

Now Paul models a third component of prayer: **passion**. Paul prays passionate prayers whereas we often pray polite prayers. Some of us grew up thinking this is what we’re supposed to do. Some of us were taught to “say” prayers—“did you ‘say’ your prayers yet Johnny?” Some of us grew up not praying, but saying polite little rehearsed prayers that were written down in a pastel prayer book with pictures of neon yellow angels and smiley freckle faced children saying cutsey prayers that rhyme while sitting on a picnic blanket in the sun.

I’m going to be a dad soon and so I’ve seen that these are the kinds of children’s prayer books

that are for sale out there. I've never been a dad before. I've never tried to teach a child how to pray. But I'll tell you my game plan: I'm going to teach my son how to pray by exposing him to the passionate prayers of the Bible.

Look at the words of Paul's prayer in verses 7–8: "feel," "heart," "yearn," "affection." These are passionate words. For Paul, prayer isn't merely intellectual, it's also highly emotional. Praying with emotion is a very biblical thing to do. Unlike some today, Paul didn't grow up on the polite prayer book. Paul grew up on the Psalms. Paul grew up praying sentences like: "I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord" (Psalm 89), "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart" (Psalm 9), and "my soul pants for God, my soul thirsts for God" (Psalm 42). Sometime soon flip through the Psalms and see just how emotionally charged these prayers are.

So as Paul prays for the Philippian Christians, he "feels" for them. He "holds them in his heart." Paul is not a professional, he's a pastor. Paul loves these people. Paul prays for them with his passions and emotions fully engaged. Paul relates to these people and he prays for these people in such a way that he could really get hurt. This isn't a distant, polite "saying" of prayers. It's the passionate prayer of a pastor for his people.

In coming on board at CPC, Paul's been a huge model for me of how I ought to pastor and pray. There's one specific prayer that I've been praying nearly every day since I arrived here. I've been praying that Jesus would break my heart for the 20-somethings of CPC and the 20-somethings of the Peninsula. I know that as a pastor I'm only going to be effective if my heart breaks for the people I'm called to shepherd. The same goes for you and your relationships. If you're going to have any kind of lasting impact for the kingdom of God, you can't pray like a professional. You've got to pray like Paul. You've got to let your prayers travel through your heart.

And let me warn you that it's virtually guaranteed that if you follow Paul's prayer model, if you love and live and pray like this, sooner or later you're going to get shot in the chest. Your heart is going to bleed and ache because people that you've loved and poured out your heart for in prayer have returned your kindness with a bullet—a bullet of betrayal, ingratitude, or indifference. Prayer isn't safe. If you pray with passion, if you pray with your emotions fully engaged, you're going to know great joy, but you're also going to know great pain. You're going to get hurt.

Unlike some of Paul's other churches, unlike the Corinthians or the Galatians, the Philippians haven't shot Paul in the chest. The Philippians love Paul. They've stood by his side, both in prison and out of prison. They'd take a bullet for him. Hopefully we too can be a church that recognizes how passionately our leaders are praying for us. Do you know how many bullets the leaders, pastors,

and elders of this church take? I assure you, they are many.

Paul keeps praying. Look at verse 8. Paul "yearns" for the Philippian church with the "affection" of Christ Jesus. What does Paul mean by "the affection of Christ Jesus?" Here we have my favorite Greek word: *splanchna*. I mentioned this word in my sermon on the Running Father. Remember that when the Father saw his prodigal son he "felt compassion," he felt "splanchna" for his son? He was ripped up inside over his son. This word *splanchna* is the word for your guts, the place where you feel the deepest emotion. In his prayer, Paul yearns for these people with the *splanchna*, the affection, of Jesus. His own affection isn't enough. He prays with the affection of Jesus. I love how the King James Version translates this. It says: the "bowels" of Christ Jesus.

This is how a church that began with three unlikely converts went on to become the first thriving church in Europe—because a guy like Paul was praying like this, praying with the "bowels" of Jesus.

Are you someone who would like to be seen as a leader in the church, who would like to do great things for God? If that's you, and I especially want all of you young people to hear this, if you want to be a leader, if you want to do great things for God, start praying like Paul. Pray this prayer. Pray the psalms. Don't say prayers—pray prayers. Get your bowels involved. Take your bullet proof vest off and pray with the affection of Jesus. If you're someone who prays like this, who prays like Paul, soon enough you'll see that you are a leader in the church and that God is doing great things through you.

IV. 1:9-11 The Fourth Essential Component of Prayer: Request.

Now we come to the fourth component of prayer: **request**. All prayer has as its core content, request. I think some of you feel guilty about this, about making prayer requests. You shouldn't. This is the whole design of prayer. Prayer is about requesting things. Remember the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, the Lord's Prayer? At the center of that prayer is a series of requests: "give us our daily bread," "forgive our debts," "lead us not into temptation," "deliver us from evil." Later in this letter Paul will explicitly tell the Philippians to let their "requests be made known God." Requests, specific requests, are central to prayer.

Look at verses 9-11. Paul's prayer request centers on love. Paul wants the Philippians' love to grow. Now notice that Paul never defines the object of this abounding love. The text doesn't make clear whether

Paul wants their love for God, their love for each other, or their love for the city of Philippi to grow. He probably means all of the above. Paul prays that God would finish what he started and grow the Philippians in their love for God, each other, and their city.

And notice that Paul wants this to be a discerning love. Emotional, passionate Paul calls for a thoughtful, discerning love. Love is not a mushy feeling. Love is a prayerful, discerning, way of life. Love thinks.

Our communities need to see a love like this. Our communities need to see a body of people whose love abounds, discerns, and, as verse 10 says, results in purity. Where will our communities encounter that kind of love except from us? Later in this letter Paul will tell the Philippians to “shine as lights in the midst of a twisted generation.” Our twisted generation is accustomed to a love that runs out, not one that abounds. Our twisted generation is used to a love that’s undiscerning and impure. Paul’s request is that the Philippians would help untwist their generation by growing in love. That’s a great request for us, for us to untwist our twisted generation through our growing love.

Paul wasn’t shy about sharing a prayer request. Paul knew that prayer’s all about asking things of God. Paul’s modeling for us the importance of boldly coming into the presence of God and making big prayer requests. Are your prayer requests as big, bold, and mature as Paul’s? They can be.

V. 1:11 The Fifth Component of Prayer: Purpose.

We’ve looked at four components of Paul’s prayer: habit, promise, passion, and request. Now we come to the fifth and final component: **purpose**. Look at the last words of this prayer. This whole prayer is directed to the glory of God. Paul is praying for the Philippians, but the ultimate purpose of this prayer is to glorify God.

This is what the whole Christian life is about—the glory of God. This is what the whole Bible is about, God’s glory. If tomorrow morning you woke up, made your coffee, sat down, and read your whole Bible straight through in one day, you would see that the message, the story, the big idea of the whole Bible is the glory of God. At about midnight as you were finishing your reading you would come across this passage in Revelation that’s a snapshot for us of the glory of God—a snapshot of what has been and always will be happening in heaven.

“And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the

throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ‘Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.’...”Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’” (Rev. 4:8–11; 5:11–13).

Why would we want to go to heaven? Because God is there—in all his glory. Why are we here this morning? Because we want to do down here what’s going on right now in heaven and give God glory.

The job description of the Christian life is for us humans to be humbled and for God to be glorified. This is a great job to have. Sometimes we make the mistake of viewing humility as a weakness. But the Bible shows us that humility is a strength. One of my heroes, a dead guy by the name of Jonathan Edwards, said: “The pleasures of humility are really the most exquisite delights in the world.” Humility is a strength that we ought to desire because only humble people can enjoy the exquisite delight of the glory of God. Humility is a strength because it positions us to enjoy and glorify God.

CONCLUSION

Now we can answer our question. What does prayer do? Here’s the answer, in seven words: Prayer humbles us and it glorifies God. Prayer does what the whole Christian life is to be about. Prayer simultaneously humbles humans and glorifies God. This is what prayer does, it positions us in a low place (that’s why it’s so hard to do) where we can best view and glorify God.

Our prayer habits humble us and glorify God because in our habits we recognize that we are entirely dependent on God. Our prayer promises humble us and glorify God because in prayer we come to see that God is a great promise keeper,

he keeps promises with promise breakers like you and me. Our prayer passions humble us and glorify God because we are reminded that the bowels of Jesus have been shot with more bullets and emotion than we could ever imagine. And our prayer requests humble us and glorify God because we come to see that the more we ask of God, the more we glorify him.

A long time ago, Alexander the Great was asked by one of his generals for an enormous sum of money. And Alexander said: "Okay, I'll give it to you." Then one of Alexander's treasurers hurried up to him and asked: "Why are you giving this man so much money? Don't you realize this is ten times more money than anyone's ever asked you for? This is ridiculous, why are you giving him so much money?" Alexander said: "Don't you realize, by asking me for so much money this man does me great honor." "What!" the treasurer replied. Alexander said: "By asking me for this ridiculous sum, it shows that this man believes I'm both rich and generous."

CPC, God is rich and generous. What prayer does is get us in touch with this.

It's all in the prepositions.

Prayer is "for" us, because we are poor and needy.

Prayer is "to" God, because God is rich and generous.

And prayer, as verse 11 says, is always "through" Jesus, because on a cross Jesus bowed his head in death so that in life we might bow our heads in prayer and humbly glorify our rich and generous God.