

school, or studying hard, all these disciplines. And then deep knowledge, that's the case for being in Bible study, daily Bible study where you go deep, and then common sense.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text. Thank you that it's so good. It's so good that we have One who goes alongside of us on this journey, and not just a set of guidelines, but we have the living presence of Jesus Christ to journey with us. And now, as we come to the Lord's Table, thank you that this table reminds us of it, assures us of it. May we experience that in our lives. In Christ's name, we pray.

Earl Frank Palmer Copyright © 2009 All Rights Reserved

May 3, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

Paul's Prayer for His Friends

Philippians 1:1-11

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

We begin a new series of sermons this Sunday on Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians. The title of this series, "Sheer Encouragement." Last week, we ended the series of sermons on "Meet Jesus of Nazareth". We had the honor last week of six high school young men and women who shared their faith. I heard each of those tapes. I was totally blessed and challenged by each of these young people; Sam and Jane, Nathan, Michael, Kelly, and Seth, who shared their faith. I know that you had the same feeling. I just thank God for what's happening in the lives of young men and women here in the life of this fellowship. Our little boys and girls who we see each Sunday grow up to become young men and women, and last week we had a chance to hear six of them share their faith.

J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, wrote a letter to his son Christopher, in the letter he said this, "The unpayable debt I owe to C.S. Lewis was not advice as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. He, for a long time, was my only audience, and only from him did I ever get the idea that my stuff could be anything more than a private hobby." The stuff that J.R.R. Tolkien is talking about is the greatest adventure story ever written, *The Lord of the Rings*. That was his stuff, and his friend, C.S. Lewis, encouraged him to publish it. He had written it originally for his kids, to read at night. He said, "I had this unpayable debt I owe to Lewis; not advice as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement."

We're about to read a book in these next weeks that Saint Paul wrote, the last book he wrote to a church. When Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he wrote several letters, and the last letter to a church is this Letter to the Philippians. It's absolutely classic. And then one more letter he wrote to a

Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20016

www.NationalPres.org 202/537-0800

person, 2 Timothy, to a young man, but this is the last letter to the church, and it is a letter of sheer encouragement. And I think you'll see that as it unfolds.

This letter from prison begins with a prayer. Listen to Paul's letter, and notice the prayer. He starts, "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and the deacons: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." And now comes the prayer. He begins with thanksgiving. "I thank my God every time I remember you constantly praying with joy." He starts with thanksgiving, thanking God for these friends and then praying for him.

Let me ask you a question here at the very beginning. If you go home or your kids come home and you're having a dinner or a celebration and someone in the family says--maybe it's dad, maybe it's mom, maybe it's grandfather, grandmother--says, "Hey, can I pray for you?" Listen closely to the prayer because in the prayer, they're going to give you some clues to things that are on their hearts regarding you. Supposing you've been away to college and your mother prays, "And, Lord, help Alice to really study hard this weekend. I know she has a midterm coming up and she's been frittering away her time a little bit." I mean, that gets to be a little bit like Martha's prayer, "Lord, make Mary come in the kitchen and help me," but it still is a prayer.

So you listen closely because in the prayer, the people who pray for you will usually give you clues to things that are on their hearts, concerning you. And that's true in this prayer as well. So I want you to listen for it. It's just a few verses. Listen closely to what Paul prays for and see what you think of it. He begins with thanksgiving. I like that for sure. "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you because of your sharing in the Gospel from the first day until now."

Remember, when he first went into Europe, this was the first church he went to. And the first convert was a woman named Lydia, a Greek woman, and then the second convert was probably a jailer who guarded him and through an earthquake and who discovered grace through Paul and Silas. That's this church. No wonder he loves them, and they love him. They sent Epaphroditus--you'll find out later in the book, to Rome to take care of him in prison because a prisoner needs to have somebody from the outside that brings food in, to make sure he's okay. So they remembered him, he remembered them.

they had a jeep there waiting for us. And they said, "You guys get in the jeep now," and we were each city slickers. We were all from Manila. None of us had ever been there before, and he said, "Now, you're going to drive up this road, and the road will kinda stop but you will follow the ruts of jeeps that have gone ahead of you." Fortunately, we have a four-wheel drive. "And you're going to drive up there, and then at one point you should cross the river. It's kind of a little river, but you need to get there before 3:00 pm because of the afternoon rains," in the tropics it rains every afternoon at 5 o'clock or 4 o'clock," and when the afternoon rains come, it will turn into a torrent, and it could tip the jeep right over when you're going across it, if you get there after the rains. So we want to get you guys off, right now, so you can get up there ahead when the rains start." We're beginning to sweat by now for a lot of reasons other than the tropics, and because we've got this drive ahead of us on this jeep, and it was sort of a non-road, too. It turned out to be a 2-hour ride up there, and we were to go alongside this river and then try to cross it and then go over to the jungle to the camp.

And then the guy said, "And here's a map. We've drawn up for you a map that will show you the way." And we looked at the map, we were studying it. Our own MapQuest, studying it carefully, up along the river and then cross the river at that point and then--and he looked at us and saw that there was a lot of terror, especially the guy that was supposed to drive that jeep. And then a beautiful thing happened. This young InterVarsity staff man who was from the camp said, "Oh, heck. I'll drive you." And we were greatly relieved, believe me. And then he drove us. And it was harrowing, though we did get there just before the rains came. So we got across the river and it did turn to a torrent afterward, but we got to the camp, and we knew that pythons and all kinds of wild creatures were up there. That's another reason why we were a little alarmed about having to cross that river. And cobras too, but we got there.

And you know, I made a discovery that day. I've never forgotten it. And the discovery is this: a guide who knows the way is better than a map that shows the way. You have Holy Scripture, and believe me, the Scripture, the Old, the New Testaments are a map that show the way. But you have something that is even better, and that is the Lord of the map who travels with us along the way. Jesus Christ, the living Christ, the Living Word is with you. And that's Paul's prayer. "I'm praying that the one who began your journey with you will continue your journey with you to the end. I'm sure of it, but I'm praying that you'll remember it, too." The one who knows the way is better than a map that shows the way. And that's what we now celebrate in the Lord's Supper. The Lord who knows the way goes with us. He paid the price so that we can make this trip. He's the one who forgave us, who heals us, and who goes alongside of us. And then, he prays that we'll have knowledge, wide knowledge. Talk about the case for going to college or to going to high

And then third, I maybe like the third the best of all, Paul prays that his friends in Philippi will have common sense. What is common sense? It's street knowledge. It is a discernment. It's knowing how long to pray before dinner while the food is getting cold.

That is discernment. It's common knowledge. It's knowing when to talk and when to be quiet. I always say about parenting, it's the art of staying close and stepping back, and you have to know how to step close and to stay back, to give space. It's knowing when to go fishing. Thank God, Peter, in the midst of his interior doubt after the resurrection of our Lord--Christ had won a victory but not Peter--and so Peter says, "I'm going fishing." And thank God for the disciples who said, "We're going with you." They knew that Peter should not be alone. Not up at that lake alone. And so Thomas, and James, and John went with him. "He needs us to be with him." That's common sense. To have the common sense to know when you're needed, when you need to step back. It's when to speak and when to be quiet. Paul is praying for that. He's praying that these Philippians will have wide knowledge, deep knowledge, and common sense.

But you know the best part of the prayer is the very beginning. He wants them to remember that the God who began the journey with them will continue it, and as we come to the Lord's Table, that's the best of all to remember. He wants you to know some things but he wants you to know, best of all, that Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd, he is the companion who's going to go with you on the journey. Notice, "the one who began the good work will continue it". You need to know that.

Can I tell you a story? When I was in the Philippines, I was a pastor for six years at Union Church of Manila, and I became very fond of the InterVarsity student group at the University of the Philippines and some of the other schools in the Philippines. I was invited on one occasion to go to an InterVarsity camp with Ada Lum, a great bible teacher from Honolulu, and we went to join with the InterVarsity students. It was a great group, about 150 of them, at their camp the Visayas, which is near Iloilo in the Philippines, they had a camp deep in the jungle, and it was called the Kawayan Campus, the Bamboo Campus. It overlooked a swift river. It was very beautiful. And we were invited to go and be there for a week and a half to lead Bible studies with these university students. It was a great week.

We flew down a day ahead because we were the speakers and wanted to get rested up before the students would arrive. So we flew down from Manila to Iloilo then took a car to where the IV staff met us, at a sugar plantation where the paved road ended, and then there was a little dirt road there. And at that point, we met one of the InterVarsity leaders from the camp, and

So he says, "because of your sharing in the Gospel from the first day until now, and I'm confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It's right for me to think this way about you because you hold me in your heart." By the way, there is a manuscript variant there. If you'll look at your footnote, it says that the manuscripts are equally divided to read either "you hold me in your heart" or "I hold you in my heart". Therefore some translations put it one way and some the other because the manuscripts are equally divided. But there it is, both ways, "because you hold me in your heart" "because I hold you in my heart." "So it's right for me to think this way for you all share in God's grace with me both in my imprisonment, and in the defense and the confirmation of the Gospel." They have been so kind to him. Now, he goes on. "For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ." The strong word "compassion" is one of Paul's love words.

And then comes the second half of this prayer. This is the prayer of intercession. "For this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best so that in the day of Christ, you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." That is his prayer.

Look at the prayer and see what Paul is praying for, and it will give us clues to the rest of this book because what he's mentioned here will become later parts of his book. First, clearly, he's thankful to God for these people. And because they love him, he loves them, and they've been partners with him, he starts the prayer that way. Then he prays for them, and there are three things he prays for in their behalf. He prays, first of all, that they will remember--do you ever notice how many times in the Psalms the psalmist will--in the prayer of the Psalms-- pray that we remember God's goodness? And he starts by saying, "I remember you." And then he's praying that they will remember that the God who began the good work in their lives will complete it. God is at work in their lives and Paul wants them to remember that. He's praying that they won't forget that. That's a beautiful prayer. So he says, "I want you to be assured that the God who began the good work in your life, will complete it." You're all a story, and your story is underway, and the story is not over, but God's at work to complete the story. That's good news. Don't forget that.

The second prayer he prays is that these believers will grow and overflow in love and out of that love there will flow fruits, what he calls "fruits of righteousness". And those fruits of righteousness will come out of that love flowing out of their lives. The love they experienced from Christ will flow

through them toward others. This is a prayer really for Christian character because the word “righteousness” is the synonym for character in the New Testament, that the character of God will be over your character and that his love will flow through your lives so that his love becomes the marker of your character. Francis Schaeffer calls love “The Mark of the Christian.” The main mark of the Christian should be love. The love of God that works in your lives flowing through you in fruitfulness toward others, that’s Christian character. He’s praying for that. He’s praying that your character will be under the influence of God’s character and that you will overflow in love and righteousness.

And now the third prayer, he then prays that they will think clearly. He uses three words to describe thinking. Listen to the way the NRSV text puts it, “And this is my prayer that your love may overflow with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what’s best.” He uses three wonderful words from the Greek language here to express this thinking part. He wants them to think clearly. And so he uses, first of all, the word *gnosko*, knowledge. We know that word because of its English language usage. If we put an “A” in front of *gnosko* we have the word “agnostic”, a person who doesn’t know. *Gnosis* is the word for “know” in Greek. It is a very important word. But he doesn’t say *gnosko* would be “not to know,” but he says *epiginosko* which means “to know broadly.” He intensifies “know”. He says, “I’m praying that you will know broadly, that you will know in every direction.” That is the mother praying that you work hard for your term paper, isn’t it? She’s praying for that. “Lord, help my son to study and help him to study that so that he goes to the exam prepared. I want him to know widely.” That’s the first prayer.

And then he used another word, *aisthesis*. This is the only place in the New Testament where this word is used. We have the English word, “thesis” from this. *Aisthesis* which means “to know deeply” or “to know meanings.” Paul prays that they will know the knowledge and then to have deep knowledge into the meanings. Notice, the NRSV decided to translate that word this way, “I’m praying that your love may overflow with more knowledge and full insight.” The New Revised Standard Version decided to translate *aisthesis* with the word “insight.” It’s the word for deep knowledge or meanings; insight into meanings.

And then the third prayer. The third word he uses is an interesting word in the Greek language *diaphero*. *Phero* means “to carry”, *dia* means “to carry along.” It means “to carry through” or “to follow through”. Have you ever known these people who have the great start-ups but never follow through? And he is now talking about following through, in classical Greek the word *diaphero* becomes the word for “common sense.” Street knowledge. Common sense.

So he’s praying three things for them. He’s praying--notice, the NRSV decided to translate *diaphero* this way: “...to help you to determine what is best.” In other words, while you’re walking along to make a wise choice. Here are Paul’s three prayers for knowledge, let’s reflect on them for just a minute. The first, he wants these folks to have what he calls *epiginosko*, knowledge in every direction.

Let me tell you something. There are no advantages to ignorance. In fact, the phrase “ignorance is bliss” is a bad joke. It’s not true. Ignorance is not bliss. Knowledge is bliss. It’s blessed to know. There are no advantages to not knowing. Tell me the advantage to not knowing CPR. I took CPR at the fire station when I was in Berkeley, and I finally passed it. Tell me the advantages to not knowing CPR. We required our whole staff at UPC in Seattle to take CPR and somebody said, “Oh, why do I need to know that?” Well, you need to know it. I can’t think of any advantages to not knowing CPR. Supposing somebody drowns and you’re there. Well, one small advantage might be that you wouldn’t have to get involved then. You could say, “Oh, you know, I don’t know anything about that. Get somebody else who knows about that.” Is that an advantage? Not if it’s your grandchild. Not if it’s your wife.

It’s good to know about mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It’s good to know about how to start a heart that’s been arrested. Tell me the advantages to not knowing it. Tell me the advantages to not studying in school and knowing mathematics. I’ve always said about my kids when they were growing up, I didn’t want any of these academic areas closed off to them. I wanted to be sure they understood subjects like math, science, music so that they could always enter that door. Tell me the advantages to not having a subject area like math or science as a doorway you could enter, or the liberal arts, or poetry. What are the advantages to not knowing about opera? Tell me. There are none. And that’s Paul’s first prayer. I’m praying that you’ll have *epiginosko*, that you’ll have wide knowledge, that you’ll be well-informed in the first century. Paul is very pro science.

Two, he prays also that they will have deep knowledge. This is to know not only what the word says but what does it mean? To know the meanings, to go deep and to go at a deeper level in your knowledge. This is the advantage of Bible studies in small groups, where you have a small group of people that can do Bible study together and then you can not only talk about “Here’s what the text says,” but also, “What do you guys think it means?” And you can work with the meanings, and that’s where one person will have an angle and you’ll have an angle and you’re able to figure out the meanings so that you know not just the surface content but you will be drawn to go down a step deeper. So Paul prays for that, *aisthesis*, to have knowledge that goes deeper, insight. And you can pray for that. God can help you with that.