

Leader Notes

Text: Philippians 1.3-11

Others

Context and Background

Background: The church in Philippi was founded by Paul on the second of his missionary journeys. This church consisted predominately of Gentiles as it was one of the few churches that Paul started without first going to a synagogue. Further, the city of Philippi itself was a thoroughly Gentile city, consisting of retired Roman military personnel. Paul writes this letter to the church in Philippi during a period of imprisonment (Philippians 1.7, 12-14, 17). That Paul took the time to send word to this congregation during his own time of trial indicates the intense pastoral concern Paul felt for those congregations he had founded. Like most of Paul's letters, this letter has a series of issues which Paul is addressing. Positively, Paul sends word thanking this congregation for their faithful support, both spiritually and financially (4.10-20). However, a series of negative issues regarding internal relationships among church members are also addressed (2.1-17, 3.15-4.9). Primarily, Paul is concerned about the spiritual maturity of the believers in Philippi and writes to encourage the expression of this growth in the face of disagreements (some theological—3.1-14) by remaining united in love.

Context: This passage of scripture follows Paul's customary salutations to the church in Philippi and thus begins what we might call the body of his letter. Most of Paul's letters begin with a thanksgiving prayer on behalf of those to whom he is writing. In this prayer, Paul often alludes to the issues he wishes to address in the remainder of his letter. The primary concern Paul raises in this prayer is that of spiritual growth (1.6). While a big topic, Paul narrows down the focus of his concern to the expression of mutual love that leads to discernment and thus a righteous life (1.9-11). The remainder of Paul's letter will develop these themes in more depth.

The Text

A Firm Confidence (1.3-6): Paul begins his letter by letting the Philippians know that he is thankful for them. As Paul approaches God in his prayers (probably alluding to his regular times of prayer and not just prayers for the Philippians) he is filled with joy because he remembers the Philippians. He is thankful for they have been ministry partners with him since the first day they heard the gospel message, from Paul. Paul has seen the Philippians move from hearing the gospel for the first time to where they are now, partnering with him in spreading the good news of hope. It fills him with joy to see how much they have grown. Paul is filled with joy, not only for their past growth, but he is filled with joy for their future growth. Paul is confident that the work begun in them by God will be carried out to completion. This statement has two sides, a positive and a negative. Positively, Paul reminds the Philippians that spiritual growth is the work of God, and that the work God begins, He finishes. Negatively, if we might say it this way, Paul indicates that the Philippian believers still have room to grow. They are not yet complete, something Paul will highlight later.

A Bond of Love (1.7-8): Paul explains why he feels so confident in the future growth of the Philippian Christians. First, Paul has them in his heart and God only knows how he longs for them. Paul has a deep, loving bond with the Philippians. He cares for them and is for them. Second, he understands that the Philippians are co-recipients of God's grace. As those who have followed Christ, the Philippians stand in God's grace. It is this same grace which is sustaining Paul in his time of imprisonment, a time in which he is having to defend his ministry and message. Here we find the foundation for Paul's great certainty in the future growth of the Philippians. He is for them and God is for them. Paul will not give up on them, nor will God, a truth seen in God's faithfulness to Paul even in his imprisonment.

An Act of Ministry (1.9-11): Paul is for the Philippians, on their side, longing for their growth. With this in mind, it is only natural that Paul act on their behalf in an effort to spur on their growth. Paul does this by praying for the Philippians. Paul approaches God on behalf of the Philippians and prays for their growth. He does so by praying for their love, the very area in which they needed to grow (Philippians 2.1-17, 3.15-4.9). Paul asks that their love might abound in an overflowing way in both knowledge and depth of insight. Both words (knowledge and insight) allude to perception that comes from experience. That is, Paul is praying not just for the feeling of love but for the practical expression of love, and this in the right and proper ways. This expression of love leads to the discernment of that which was best in relationship with others. One would seek the good of others as they loved them (See 2.3-4). This expressed love of seeking the best for others would then lead to continued growth, growth that would lead to purity in one's life and the expression of works that resemble the life of Christ. It is this life that would then bring glory to God.

Application: God is working in each and every one of us that are following Jesus in faith, bringing about His plans, the life of Christ. One of the most loving things we can do for our fellow believers, those to whom we are bound in love, is to partner with God in this process of transformation. We see that one way in which we might partner with God is through prayer, prayer for the spiritual growth of our fellow believers, growth in the areas they need it most. When Paul prayed for the believers in Philippi, he did not pray for health or ease. He did not pray for comfort or even joy. Paul prayed for growth, for growth in the area the Philippians needed it most, the mutual expression of love. Paul understood his prayer to be part of the process of the Philippians being transformed, leading to fruitful and blameless lives. Do we partner with God in the same way on behalf of those whom we love? Do we allow others to partner with God for us? Are we willing to go before God and ask for transformation, for growth in the areas where it is needed most? In so doing we are engaging in a holy activity, an activity that not only brings transformation but glory to God.

Prayer: Brings God into Life

Discussion Guide 5

Philippians 1.3-11

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- When have you felt that someone was really for you? What, if anything specific, made you feel this way?

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes *(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)*

Setting the Stage: *How do I know if someone is for me, really? Is it their words of encouragement, their gift of time, their service to me, their lavishing of praise and encouragement upon me? Sure all of these things make us feel better, but to know if someone is really for us, we have to know that they are concerned about what matters most, what matters most to us. So what matters most? Our car that needs to be repaired? What about a child that is running rogue? Or maybe a family member that is ill and dying? Do these matter? Sure. Do they matter most? Hardly. When we are really honest, when we really dig deep, what matters most is God and our relationship with Him. God is the best thing in life, the first thing in life, the only thing in life we really need. The deeper our relationship grows with Him the more we find meaning and value in life. This is what matters most. Sometimes things get in the way of this relationship. Most of the time. We grow, but slowly. In various and sundry ways, our relationship is stunted, misshapen. We need growth. We need God. It is here that perhaps we find if people are truly for us. Are they willing to care about this area, this area that matters most? Are they willing to invest with us, invest with God so that we might grow to know God, so that we might grow beyond the misshapen and stunted to rich fullness? Are they willing? Are we willing to do the same in return?*

- Read Philippians 1.3-11.
- In what ways did Paul demonstrate that he was for the Philippian believers?
- How do people today show they are for one another? In what ways are these similar or dissimilar to Paul's own actions?
- Paul demonstrated that he was for the Philippians by partnering with God in prayer for their spiritual growth. Do you find that this practice marks your relationships with others? What about their relationship with you? Can you elaborate?
- How might partnering with God in prayer on behalf of the spiritual growth of others demonstrate your deep love for them?
- What might this partnering with God look like for you?
- Break up into pairs. We recommend that couples and mixed groups pair up with persons of the same gender. Spread out into different rooms if possible in order to have a measure of privacy. Spend some moments sharing with one another the areas in which you each need growth the most. These are areas that relate to your relationship with God. Conclude your time by praying for one another with respect to these areas. Exchange email addresses or phone numbers and follow up with one another through the week. You might consider continuing to meet and talk with this person outside of group over the next few weeks and months to continue to share and pray for one another.

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- Prayer requests
- Group Prayer time
- House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)