

INTRODUCTION

I like road-trips. I do not mind the long drive when time is not a constraint. My wife and I used to visit her two sisters in Texas. From here to Dallas it takes about 10 hours. In winter time it was dark when we set off and it was dark when we got there. After we have kids a new challenge we face is how to keep them entertained along the way. A recurring question we heard was: “Are we there yet?” To keep these little passengers happy we gave them movies on portable DVD player, and later their own tablet computers. We also stopped at their favorite restaurants that serve unhealthy food they like. The fatigue from the journey is offset by the excitement that we are getting closer to the destination. Christian life is similar to that. There are ongoing challenges to overcome. But we can have joy, knowing that the more we travel the closer we are to the final destination. When Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians he encouraged his beloved recipients to rejoice in the Lord. Paul founded the church during the second of his three missionary trips. Philippians is a personal letter to thank the believers for their financial support. Paul also expressed his longing to visit the church soon despite the fact that he was imprisoned. Paul reminded the believers to stand firm in the faith. From the outside there would be persecution. Inside the church there were signs of disunity. Since the first century every church faces the same situation. There is opposition from our surrounding and hardship from within the four church walls. Paul loved this church even though it was imperfect. Do we love our church? May Paul’s encouragement to the Philippian church be our constant reminder too, that we as a church should recount God’s grace as we focus on the finishing line.

EXPLANATION

1. 為你的教會感恩 Praise for Your Church

Paul showed his love for the Philippian church by giving praise to the Lord. Let us look at **verses 3 to 5**: 3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. Paul said that every time he thought of the Philippians his heart was full of gratitude. He did not say: “Every time I think of you wrinkles show up on my forehead.” Therefore, whenever he prayed for the church he did so with joy. It was because the Christians there were faithful partners of Paul in the gospel work. The word “partnership” here is the same word for “fellowship” in Greek. One form of partnership was through financial support. In **4:15-16** Paul thanked the church for their support – 15 Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; 16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Sometimes when we contribute to the Mission Fund we give our money and do not think much about it. However, on the receiving end the missionaries and mission organizations see the contribution as a means of partnership for their work. Because of this partnership Paul could continue his mission work. He went on to use his praise for the church to encourage the believers to press on, even though there would be difficulties. Paul shared his personal testimony about how the Lord made use of the hardship he faced to further

the gospel. He said in **verse 12**: Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. Paul did not focus on the fact that he was suffering in a prison. Instead, he rejoiced because the gospel was going forward. How? Read **verse 13**: As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Paul said that even the Roman soldiers could clearly see that they locked up an innocent person simply because he was sharing the gospel. We can make a quick application here. No one would volunteer to go through difficulty in life. When you put the sole focus on your suffering – that how helpless you are, that you are being unfairly treated – on and on you will fall into a pit of despair. Instead, if you realize that your suffering can witness for Christ to the people around you then you can rejoice. Through Paul's experience Christians were motivated. **Verse 14** reads: Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. Paul's boldness stirred up courage in his fellow brothers to preach the gospel. Therefore, Paul's heart was filled with joy. Paul reminded the Philippian believers that their work for the gospel was far from finish. He shared in **verse 6**: Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Paul was fully convinced that since it was the Lord who established this church the Lord would continue to use the church to expand His Kingdom until Christ's return. Whoever God has called He will enable with His power from above to accomplish His plan.

Paul showed his love for the Philippian church by giving praise to the Lord. As we look at our church are our hearts full of praise to the Lord too? It goes back to the half cup of water analogy. The optimists are glad because there is still half cup of water in the glass, whereas the pessimists lament that half of the water is already gone. For those of us who came to our church in 2015 or before we may have mixed feelings. If I ask you to write down the negative things about our church some of you may be able to come up with a long list. Our attendance used to be higher, we had more coworkers a few years back, we were financially more sufficient, etc. However, if our only conclusion is that we are no better than before then it would be hard for us to give praise. Don't get me wrong. There are lessons we need to learn and remember. However, we should never lose sight of the fact that the Lord has been watching over us. Was the gospel being advanced despite our challenges? Of course! If we are convinced that it is God who started SLCCC then there are always reasons to give praise for. The Lord who calls us to follow Him, strengthens us by His grace and assigns us to various ministries will also lead us home. Our eyes should not be fixed only on the past problems or on the current bottleneck issues. Our eyes should be on Christ's return. God has His plan for SLCCC and for you and me. We are like His unfinished masterpiece. Let us stand on God's grace and continue to pursue the goals He has set before us. At this time I would like to pause and ask everyone to close your eyes and reflect on God's grace to our church. In the next few minutes I encourage brothers and sisters to use no more than one minute to lead us in giving praise to the Lord. Your prayer can simply be: "Lord, I give praise to you for our church because..., amen!" Please stand up and speak up as you pray so that others can hear you.

2. 為你的教會禱告 Pray for Your Church

We as a church should recount God's grace as we focus on the finishing line. Paul showed his love for the Philippian church not only by giving praise to the Lord, he also prayed for the

church. Paul offered his prayer in **verses 9 to 11**: 9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God. At first glance this prayer looks complicated. If we look at the grammatical structure of the statement (as showed on the slide) it helps us understand that Paul was making two petitions for the Philippian church. First, Paul prayed that they might increase their love based on knowledge and spiritual insight, in order for them to discern what God saw as the best. Next, Paul prayed that they might stay pure and blameless until Christ's return, so that they could bear fruit of righteousness. The two anticipated outcomes led to an ultimate goal, that God would receive glory and praise.

With that in mind let us look at each petition. In the first petition, Paul prayed that the believers' "love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight." By "knowledge" Paul referred to the spiritual knowledge of Christ that comes from experience. For example, you can read all the articles about President Trump, but it does not mean that you actually know the person until you sit down and talk with him. When we study the Bible we can understand Christ's attributes and work. But we can know Him deeply as we put our faith into action and experience Him in our lives. Besides, Paul prayed for spiritual insight. In the Bible spiritual insight is not about commonsense or one's IQ. It refers to godly wisdom. Paul prayed that God would help the Philippian believers to increase their love that is built on knowledge of Christ and spiritual insight. Paul said that with this kind of love we can discern what God sees as the best. Paul elaborated this thought in **4:8** of this letter: Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things. The more we think about God's best our thoughts will turn into action. For example, how do you make decision when you change job? Is it based on your best or God's best? Say if a certain job requires a lot of travel and you have young children at home. Would you accept it? There may be another job offer with a lower salary but it does not require any travel. You can stay home after work to care for your family, and you can serve in the church regularly. That may be God's best for you. But if you are single and the overseas travel enable you to visit your parents and relatives in your home country and share the gospel with them, then that may be God's best for you.

Paul's second petition in the second half of **verse 10** was that they "may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ." Paul prayed that they would stand firm until Christ's return. The term "pure" is a compound word that literally means to judge under the sunlight. An analogy I can think of is to hold up a garment in sunlight after laundry to check if certain stain has been washed away. Then the word "blameless" does not mean perfect. Rather, it means not leading others to stumble in sin. Paul used two synonyms of the word in **2:15** of the letter. Let us read from **2:14-15** - 14 Do everything without complaining or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe. As God's chosen people living in a fallen world we have to live a pure and blameless life that reflects God's characters. Paul went on to tell us that a direct result of staying pure and blameless is that we can bear "fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ." This fruit is a visible sign that a person has an intimate relationship with Christ. What kind of fruit Paul had in mind? He gave us a few examples in this letter. In **1:14** Paul shared that some brothers showed fruits of courage to preach the gospel when they saw that

Paul was in chain for the sake of Christ. In 2:2-3 Paul encouraged the believers to bear the fruit of unity and humility even though they had different opinions. Also, in 4:11-12 Paul testified that he had the fruit of contentment whether he had a lot or lacking. When we act in ways that are contrary to our natural instinct we know that these fruits are from the Lord. For example, we can have boldness to stand up for truth. We can have joy when people humiliate us because of our faith. We can yield ourselves to others when there are different opinions.

In Paul's prayer the ultimate goal of discerning what God sees as the best and bearing fruit of righteousness is to ascribe glory and praise to God. All that we do should be for the glory and praise to God. In **1 Corinthians 10:31** Paul encouraged us: So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Therefore, even in trivial things like what to eat and drink we should do so for the glory of God. Paul prayed for a desire to pursue God's best and to bear fruit of righteousness. What do we usually ask for in our prayer? Perhaps we pray for effectiveness in ministries, sick people being healed, job seekers find employment, single people discover their future spouses, etc. Those are very reasonable things to pray for. Besides praying for quantifiable results we should also pray for our spiritual growth to be more like Christ. We can pray for humility, unity, joy, contentment, love and patience toward one another, etc. In God's eyes those are more important qualities we should pursue. Ultimately, through our spiritual growth God receives all the praise and glory.

CONCLUSION

We as a church should recount God's grace as we focus on the finishing line. Paul expressed his love for the Philippian church by giving praise and prayer for the believers. Do you love your church? Let me conclude with a true story. A businessman named Doug encountered a serious car accident. Doug was sitting in the back-seat. His chauffeur crashed into the vehicle in front of him. The seatbelt cracked ten of Doug's ribs and damaged several of his internal organs. It took a team of doctors 16 hours to save him. Finally, he awoke in the ICU feeling confused and pain all over the places. The first image showed up to him was the face of his wife. She squeezed Doug's hand and whispered a few comforting words: "I'm right here." Those simple words were great encouragement to Doug. He knew that he did not have to go through the long recovery process by himself. His family members surrounded him. While Doug was still in the hospital he noticed a small thing that distinguished the best medical staff. They asked a simple question: "How can I help?" They spent time to understand the particular needs of their patients and adjusted the treatments accordingly. As we look at our church, if we can find reasons to give praise to the Lord we know that He is still with us. Our Lord comforts us as if saying to us: "I'm right here. Don't be afraid." If you love this church enough to offer your prayer you would not pray like an outsider. Through your prayer you ask the Lord: "How can I help?" Brothers and sisters: we are never alone. God is with us and many faithful coworkers are around us. Through all that we do we give all the glory and praise to our God!