

Forward in Faith

This is the first week of our Forward in Faith sermon series. It's four weeks looking at where our ministry might go in the next few years. We're hoping maybe a new Bible study room, new school classrooms, less debt so we can do more ministry, that's where we want to end.

Paul's Prayer

But we start in an ancient Roman jail. Where a prisoner folds his shackled hands and prays for a church. It's the Apostle Paul and he's praying for a church 600 miles away in Philippi. As he prays he remembers the faces of those people. There's Lydia, the first Philippian friend. Almost ten years ago, Paul showed up as a missionary and he didn't know if people would love him or hate him. But Lydia and her friends weren't just friendly they listened to him, fed him, gave him a place to stay. They wouldn't take no for an answer! She was his partner in crime, and their crime was worshiping Jesus. So Paul smiled. And there was the Jailer—the Jailer! You know Paul actually got locked up in Philippi too. But there a miracle earthquake set him free. That's when he saw the Jailer with a sword pointed at his own stomach. "Don't!" Paul yelled. He saved the man's life. And then he went over to his house and told him about Jesus. They had midnight baptisms for the whole family! That jailer became Paul's brother through baptism, his partner in ministry. What a crazy night! How could he not smile about that?

So when Paul sat in Rome, his hands shackled and folded, he was absolutely *beaming* as he prays for that church. That's where we start our Forward in Faith campaign. Before we get to buildings, or budgets, or commitments, we're going to pray about our church like Paul prayed about his church.

So here's our theme for today:

PRAY PAUL'S PARTNERSHIP PRAYER

We'll learn from Paul

HOW to pray

WHY we pray that way,

WHAT to pray for.

HOW to Pray Paul's Partnership Prayer

First, how did Paul pray? See if you can pick up on his attitude while we read this together. ³**I thank my God every time I remember you.** ⁴**In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy** ⁵**because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,** 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.** (Philippians 1:3-6) Did you catch his attitude? In all my prayers for you I pray with joy. He's beaming! And he's confident about the future. That's because while Paul prays he remembers *partnership* he has with those people. It's Paul's Partnership Prayer. If Paul was the only one sharing the gospel, then as soon as he was in prison, that's it. No more ministry. But he had partners. He had Lydia's hospitality, the jailer's passion, and a crowd of believers partnering for the gospel. That little crew had supported Paul with their friendship, and more than once they sent money so he could start new churches.

They had done good work together. But if that good work depended on the people, then it could change any day. People are imperfect. Some days you're feeling good, some days you're feeling grumpy. That's how humans are. But their good work didn't depend only on people. It was God working through people. God does not have bad days. Paul says that God who began the good work in you will continue that work. That's not wishful optimism, that's confidence in an all-powerful God. How did Paul pray? With joy and confidence.

HOW Will Mount Olive Pray?

What about us? How will we pray? The danger is that we would take for granted what we have. We can be tempted to look at the people or the building and focus on what we don't like or our shortcomings. There's a place for looking to improve. But there's also a place for Paul's Partnership Prayer, for beaming with joy and confidence. If you'd like to grow in your joy and confidence, let's do a comparison. Compare what can do by yourself to what we do together. Our goal is to share the gospel so believers are encouraged, and so unbelievers can come to faith. How would you do that *all by yourself*? You could write letters, post on social media, talk to people in person, and then do your best to keep up with all those relationships going forward. That's good work. Compare that to what we do *together, as partners*. Together we provide worship services. Every week we review the best things about what God has done for us, and we make those available online. Together we provide a Christian school so that in their most formative years our children can have their worldview shaped by Jesus. Together we can coordinate a fund-raising campaign so that people in foreign countries can hear about Jesus. Look around the building, and the people, and the work that we do together. It's all evidence that God is working through us here. When we talk about moving forward in faith, we are not relying on wishful optimism. We are talking about confidence that God who began this good work, will carry it into the future. How will you pray for our church? With joy and with confidence.

WHY Pray Paul's Partnership Prayer?

I wonder if the soldiers guarding Paul in that Roman prison, thought he was crazy. "Joy and confidence?" Dude, you're in jail. And someone might ask you, "Why are you so joyful and confident? In this economy, with coronavirus, with divisions among people? Why would you pray like that?"

Paul tells us why. **“It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. ⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.”** (Philippians 1:7-9) Paul, why are you so joyful and confident? He says because of my partners. They can take away my freedom, my ministry, even my life. But no matter what, I have you in my heart. We are connected by what Jesus has done for us. **“All of you share in God’s grace with me.”** God’s grace is that undeserved love that he showed us when he sent Jesus to die on the cross and take away all our sins. That we share, and no one can take it away because no one can change God’s love.

In What Way Are We Partners?

I’ve heard of a similar connection among cancer patients. I was talking to one of our church members who survived cancer and he told me that the people in the treatment center became like a family. There were democrats in there and republicans, Packer fans and Bears fans, and even if they had nothing else in common, they shared a sickness. They knew one another’s pain. And yet what brought them all to the same room was the cure.

Sin infects democrats and republicans, Packer fans and Bears fans. Even if we have nothing else in common, we are equally hopeless in our sins. And yet what’s gathered us together today is the cure. God in his unthinkable mercy sent Jesus for you, and the same Jesus for you, and the same Jesus for you. We might disagree—you might disagree with one another—we might disagree about everything, but **all of you share in God’s grace with me.** No one can take that away because no one can change God’s love. Why do we pray with joy and confidence? Because we share God’s grace.

WHAT Do We Pray?

So, when we pray for our church, what do we pray for? Paul says: **“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 for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.”** (Philippians 1:9-11)

What do we pray for? Love! But not just love. Love can make you do amazing things, but love can also make you do some really foolish things. Paul’s prayer is for informed love. Knowledge plus love allows you to **“discern what is best”** to step back and look at your life and say “here are all the things I could do. And this one will do the most good.” When we have informed love, we **“will be filled with the fruit of righteousness.”** Have you been to an apple orchard this fall? The trees are sagging under the weight of the apples. Christians don’t grow apples; we grow righteousness—doing what’s right. Our church can do amazing things in the future, just like the amazing things in the past because it doesn’t come from our own wisdom or ability. It all **“comes through Jesus Christ.”**

That’s my prayer for Mount Olive too. I pray that we would be so connected to the love of Jesus that the love just pours out of us. Not the foolish kind of love, the informed kind. The kind where we can look at all the opportunities in front of us and do something amazing by the power of Jesus in us. I’m trying to capture Paul’s Partner Prayer, not for Philippi, but for Mount Olive.

So quick review of Paul’s partnership prayer. When we pray, we are beaming with joy and confidence because of what God has done through our partnership. We pray this way because we are connected by the grace that God has shown us in Jesus. We smile, we think of Jesus, and we pray that God would give our church hearts full of love, brains full of wisdom, so that the next part of our ministry will be something amazing, to God’s glory. Will we meet all our goals? I

don't know. God hasn't promised that. But he has promised to work in our hearts and listen to our prayers. Let's hold him to it.

Commit to Pray Paul's Partnership Prayer

Will you commit to praying that way for Mount Olive for the next three weeks? We'll talk about a possible financial commitment, there's information about that in a letter. You'll see a video in two weeks. But let's start with prayer. Will you commit to Pray Paul's Partner Prayer for Mount Olive? I say "commit" because I know it's so easy to say, "You're in our thoughts and prayers," but then accidentally forget about it. But a commitment takes a strategy to stick to it.

So here's our prayer strategy: In the pew in front of you are little cards which say, "I have you in my heart." That's what the apostle Paul said about the Philippians. On the back there's a smiley face because we pray with *joy*. There's a cross because we all share *Jesus*. There's a heart because we are praying for informed love.

Take that card home and put it on your pillow. Before you go to bed, pick it up. First think of something about our ministry that makes you *smile*. Second, remember that *Jesus* connects us. Then pray for our church to overflow with *love*.

That's Paul's Partner Prayer. Let's give it a try. Pray with me.

Sample Prayer

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for the people at Mount Olive. As different as we are, all sinners, you have connected us all because you sent Jesus for all of us. Fill us with love and wisdom, so we can do something amazing for you.

Amen.

You with me on this prayer commitment? Amen? Amen.