

**April 30, 2017**  
**Don't pray too small ...**  
**Philippians 1:1-11**

Is there something more to the universe than just which we see? David Wilkinson (Ph.D. in astrophysics, Ph.D. in theology), author of *When I pray what does God do?*, asks those questions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwUrJFxFa0>

Is there more to the universe?

I believe there is. When I came to believe in God in my teens, I had a profound sense of God's existence. In part, I knew that in my heart, mind, soul, head – my whole being. I had an incredible sense of God's grace, mercy, and love.

But I also had the sense of God's presence in a different way when I was outside in nature. I am still a person who connects well with God when I am outside, in His creation. And as I studied geography at university, I loved the fact that whether I was studying human activities or God's natural world, I was studying His creation. God's creation is incredible. And I walked in His world and studied His creation with a sense of awe and wonder

Paul prayed for his friends in Ephesus, that *"he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in our inner being, so Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God"* (Ephesians 3:16-19).

The love of Jesus and power of God is wide enough to encompass a hundred billion stars in hundreds of billions of galaxies – all this amazing universe is His. The love of Jesus and power of God is long enough to span the creation of the universe to infinity and beyond – He is the Lord of all space and of all time.

The love of Jesus and power of God is high enough and deep enough to bring our all-mighty, all-holy, all-loving Father together with the most despicable wretch imaginable – and change lives. God's love changes lives. I'm living proof of that.

***Paul's prayer for his friends in Philippi***

And so, today, we come to another of Paul's prayers for his friends. He is writing to his friends in Philippi, a rough and tumble town on the Roman frontier in northern Greece – a mining town and a town where pensioned-off Roman soldiers received free land so they could keep the local riff-raff in line. Philippi was the stomping ground of Alexander the Great and the locals still longed for the glory days of his empire ... In Philippi, Paul had been stripped, beaten, severely flogged and thrown in prison. And in Philippi God did miracles: there was an earthquake and everyone's chains fell off. The jailer and his family came to faith in Jesus (you can read the story in Acts 16:11-40). I don't know what your

impression of a 1<sup>st</sup> Century jailer on the frontier might be, but chances are he's one of the roughest, toughest of the lot!

Paul is writing this letter from prison, again – this time in Rome where he is awaiting trial (he will eventually be executed for his faith under Nero's watch).

Paul begins his letter with gratitude and joy because he knows he is not alone. Even though they are separated, the Philippians are his brothers and sisters in Jesus (1:3-5) – including the jailer and his family.

These are people who have shared God's gift of grace and mercy (1:7). Like Paul, God has come into their lives, dealt with the past, and given them new hope and a new life to move forward, in relationship with Jesus. Paul knows this in his own life; he affirms it in others.

Because Paul has seen what God has done in the past (earthquakes, converted jailors will do that for you), he is confident God can still do great things. *"Confidence,"* writes David Wilkinson, *"is such a key thing in how we grow and how we live. I don't mean overconfidence that leads to arrogance and carelessness, but a sense of security and a conviction that there will be victory"* (p. 219). We know that, in sports, for instance. A hockey team without confidence plays it safe, avoiding risks but at the same time makes more mistakes. However, a team who believes, with confidence in themselves, are more creative, press harder, and have the strength to win in overtime.

Confidence in prayer is a challenge, too. Paul is not in Philippi. The church is still under attack in the city by the powers-that-be. Within the church there is fighting and spats. It would be easy to give up and count it all a colossal failure. But Paul is *"confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus"* (1:6). Paul is confident that just as God was at work in Philippi, God is still at work in Philippi, and will continue to be at work in Philippi.

Why? Because we are dealing with God, here! The God of the galaxies. The God who (literally) knocked Paul off his high horse. The God who took a brutal old jailer and brought him to faith in Jesus.

### ***And so Paul prays ...***

And so Paul prays: *"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may 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"* (1:9-11).

Do you ever pray for other people like that? Wilkinson comments, *"If I am honest my prayer life by comparison is so trivial. I learnt as a child to say, 'God bless Daddy, God bless Mummy, God bless Auntie Hilda and look after me. Amen.'* Apart from changing the names sometimes my adult prayers are not too different!"

Paul prays that our love may overflow more and more – with knowledge. That we would love smartly and wisely with the love of God. He prays that our love may overflow more and more in depth of insight. That we would see the world as God sees the world; with eyes of compassion, mercy, and grace.

Paul prays that we may be able to discern what is best – so that as we pray, *"Your Kingdom and your will be done"* we would see how we can begin to make that happen, right here, right now.

He prays that we might be pure and blameless: he prays for the ability to recognize temptation and to resist temptation. *"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"* (Philippians 4:8).

He prays that we would be filled with the fruit of righteousness: *"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23).

Paul is NOT praying simply that his friends in Philippi scrape through. He is praying for excellence in their lives following Jesus. He is praying that they transform their community with the love and grace of Jesus. *"It's a wonderful truth of the gospel that God in Jesus accepts me as I am, but that I only half the story,"* adds Wilkinson. *"His purpose is to transform us into the holiness of Jesus and indeed to transform all things into a new heaven and a new earth"* (p. 220).

Perhaps we struggle with prayer because we don't have a big enough vision. We don't have a big enough vision of who God is, not who we, as people who pray, are. Bishop Festo Kivengere (1919–1988), a Ugandan Christian leader referred to as "the Billy Graham of Africa," once said, *"I'm just and ordinary Christian. There are no extraordinary Christians anywhere, just ordinary ones saved by an extraordinary Saviour."*

### ***Paul concludes ...***

Paul concludes his letter to his friends with these words: *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:4-7).

*"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."* Paul is writing this from prison. But he is living his teaching with integrity. Nothing in his circumstances is changing. But he is able to see God at work, even in his circumstances: *"I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it*

*has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear" (1:12-14).*

*"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."* He is writing these words to people suffering for their faith. He is writing this to a church that is wracked by conflict (4:2-3). But he believes in the power of God. He believes in the love of Jesus. He believes in the work of the Spirit. He has confidence that the One who began a good work in them will bring it to completion.

Is my God too small? Do I need to look again at the night sky and remember that the Lord of Creation is also Lord of my life? Do I need to reflect again on those times in my own life when I have encountered the greatness of God – humbling times, disturbing times, wonderful times – and stand back in awe and wonder.

May we **pray** in that confidence ...

- that our love may abound more and more in knowledge,
- that our love may abound more and more depth of insight,
- that we may be able to discern what is best
- that we may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,
- that we may be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God

Lord, help us to **live** in that confidence ...

Bishop Kivengere (*"There are no extraordinary Christians anywhere, just ordinary ones saved by an extraordinary Saviour"*) fled Uganda in 1973 after speaking out against Idi Amin (President of Uganda, responsible for 100,000-500,000 deaths). One bishop had already been murdered by Amin. In a book entitled, *I Love Idi Amin*, Kivengere emphasized the challenge of living our faith, even forgiving those who wronged you and love of those who persecute you: *"On the cross, Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, because they know not what they do.' As evil as Idi Amin is, how can I do less toward him?"*

Kivengere was a great storyteller. A favorite story of his is this: *"One day a little girl sat watching her mother working in the kitchen. She asked her mummy, 'What does God do all day long?' For a while the mother was stumped, but then she said, 'Darling, I'll tell you what God does all day long. He spends his whole day mending broken things.'"*

Lord, help us to **pray** and to **live** in that confidence ...