

The Journey of Prayer

Rich Nathan
October 23, 1994
Philippians Series
Philippians 1:1-8

This morning I am going to begin an extended series from the book of Philippians that I am really looking forward to. I have been enjoying my time studying the book of Philippians very much over the last several weeks. I actually began talking with you about Philippians a couple of weeks ago when we looked at Paul's rather unusual and supernatural guidance to the city of Philippi.

But today we are actually going to look at the letter of Paul to the Philippians beginning in verse 1:

"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you. 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, 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. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with affection of Christ Jesus."

In a moment I am going to talk about the subject of these verses, which is what I am going to call the “Journey of Prayer.” But I would like to give you a little bit of background to this letter.

The letter to the Philippians was written to a church that was planted by the apostle Paul in the city of Philippi. It was actually Paul’s first church plant in Europe. When you think about it, you realize how significant the supernatural guidance to Philippi was in that Europe became the base for Christianity and for all Christian missionary endeavors for the next 1800 years. So Philippi was Paul’s first European church plant. It is the first venture of Christianity in Europe.

Philippi was named for the father of Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great’s father was named Philip of Macedon. He took the city in a great battle back in about 360 B.C. Closer to the time of Paul, Philippi was the site of another great battle. Perhaps somewhere in the recesses of your mind, you remember that the Roman Emperor named Julius Caesar was assassinated by some traitors named Brutus and Cassias. And the forces loyal to Julius Caesar joined under the command of Marc Antony and Octavia who later became the emperor. And these forces loyal to Julius Caesar fought a decisive battle against the traitors, Brutus and Cassias, and defeated them in the city of Philippi.

Philippi became then a Roman colony, taking on Roman customs. They actually printed money in Latin. Philippi was a military base occupied, by and large, by soldiers from Rome. So it was a heavily Roman city.

Now, as you read Paul's letter to the Philippians, you realize that this letter is really unique among the whole canon of New Testament scriptures in that Paul has, it seems, a deeper affection for the church and Philippi than any of his other churches. There is a close personal link between Paul and the church at Philippi. He writes the letter in a very personal way bringing the Philippians up to date on his own personal situation. He is very open with them about his own needs. It is a very personal letter, Philippians.

It is also a letter written simply to say thank you to the Philippians for helping to support Paul financially while he was engaged in other missionary endeavors and while he was in jail. Apparently, the Philippians were very generous financially to Paul. And Paul's connection with the Philippians was so close that he was willing to take money from them when he wasn't willing to take money for his personal needs from other churches. You know, to the Old Testament churches, Paul's basic attitude was "I'm not going to take money from you because you might misunderstand my motives in receiving your money. You might think that I am really in this religion business for the money. You might listen to my critics who say I am greedy, one of those peddlers of faith. You know the ancient equivalent of a tele-evangelist."

But to the Philippians he said, “I am convinced that you really know my heart. You don’t suspect my motives. You know what kind of man I am. Because I am so confident in your trust in me, I am willing to receive financial support from you.” That was a big thing for the apostle Paul.

So here is a church that Paul really loved and the Lord’s love and joy permeates the letter to the Philippians. You are going to note in the letter that women played a very important part in the leadership of the church in Philippi. The convert in the church was a woman named Lydia.

Another reason why the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians was to deal with an issue of division in the church. As Paul looked at the church at Philippi, one of the things that he discerned was that there was a problem of competitiveness among some of the people. Some of the people were really trying to get ahead of others and they were putting too much weight on what their position was in the church. He saw the growing problem of disunity and competitiveness and so he wrote this letter not only to say “thank you” to them for their gifts, not only to share with the Philippians some personal news about his situation, not only to express his heart of love for them, but also to correct this growing problem of division and competitiveness and one-upmanship in the church.

We get a hint of the correction that Paul is going to bring to the church for its competitiveness and one-upmanship in the first couple of verses where it says,

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.”

Now, I know that as you read Paul's letters the tendency would be to just sort of sort of skim over the greeting- Paul and whomever to whatever church-and to view the greetings as superfluous. As really not worth thinking about at all because it is just his way of starting the letter. You know, it is one of those kinds of greetings like “Dear Joe, How are you? I am fine.”

But what I want you to note in your own study of the scripture is that you can get an indication regarding the purpose of Paul's letters very often by looking at the specific way that Paul begins the letter with his greeting. If you do a study of this, you will find that Paul does not begin all of his letters the same way. And very often tucked away, hidden in the greeting, is a hint of one of the main purposes for Paul's writing the letter.

Thus, for example, in Paul's letter to the Galatians, Paul was writing because his apostolic authority was being challenged by some people coming in from Jerusalem to the church in Galatia. Some folks from the outside were coming into the church and basically saying, “Who the heck is the apostle Paul what you should listen to him? He is a Johnny-come-lately. He is not one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus. His authority is less than the original twelve's.”

And Paul gives us a hint of what is to come in his incredible defense of his apostleship and the apostleship message of grace when he begins the letter to the Galatians saying, “Paul, an apostle, sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father.” Right from the get-go, Paul launches out of the starting gate saying, “I want you Galatians to know that my apostleship was a result of a direct call by Jesus Christ and I am in no way inferior to any other man when it comes to the authority on my life to preach to you the gospel.”

So, if you search through Paul’s letters and you look at the greetings, the greeting very often, not always, some of the greetings are very brief-but very often the greeting gives you a taste of what is to come. And so here in Philippians we get a taste of what is to come when Paul says, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.” Here is something unique. In the letters of Paul, no where else does Paul link himself with Timothy using one title – “Paul and Timothy, servants...” no where else does he link himself with anyone else under one title. This is really important because in a church of oneness, a church where people were saying, “Hey, I was here before you, therefore, I have a right to a certain position.”

“I have paid my dues; therefore, I have a right to lead this ministry.”

“I am more talented than you are and I resent your leadership.”

The apostle Paul is saying, “Hey, I want you to check out my example. I am 25 years older than Timothy. Timothy is my son in the faith. I led this kid to Christ. I am a great apostle. He is a relative nobody and yet, I will link myself to him as an equal- Paul and Timothy, not Paul over Timothy, Paul and Timothy.” And look at the title he gives to both himself and to Timothy. Servants. Because what you need to deal with divisiveness and competitiveness and one-upmanship, we have to start seeing ourselves as servants of each other. That our job is not to get ahead of one another, but to bless one another and to encourage one another’s lives.

When he speaks to the church, he says, “To the saints together in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons” that group of leaders, overseers, are linked to the deacons and actually many people believe that this was not two groups at the writing of the letter to the Philippians, but one group-pastors who were deacons. The word “deacon” means servants- pastors who were servants. What the apostle Paul was saying is, “Hey, this letter is coming from a man who sees himself as a servant to a group of leaders and people who ought to see themselves as servants.” He is giving us a taste of what is coming. One of the themes that is going to run through this letter to the Philippians is this theme of servanthood.

Now, I told you that what this message is going to be about is the journey of prayer. I see the Christian life as a journey. We are on a road. And the destination is a perfect relationship with Jesus Christ. None of us are there yet. We start the journey when we turn to God in repentance and faith. But our life really is a journey. And a good deal of

the relationship that we have with God in this life can be describes as a journey of prayer. In verses 3-8, actually stretching all the way down to verse 11, but we will tackle that next week- in verses 3-8 Paul describes the stages of the journey of prayer. That is my title today- *The Journey of Prayer*. And let's begin with a word of prayer.

The Journey of Prayer. And what I want to do first is talk about the beginning of the journey- where prayer starts. Let's look together at verses 3 and 4.

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy."

You know, most of us never get on the road, the journey of prayer, toward that perfect relationship with God because if you picture this journey like an on-ramp to a highway, most Christians regularly miss the on-ramp. We say, "Yeah, I see this highway stretched out in front of me. A highway that will bring greater intimacy with God, but I keep missing the on-ramp. I don't even know where to start."

Now, I am convinced that most Christians have communicated to them at the set of the Christian life an utterly wrong perspective regarding where the on-ramp is, what the on-ramp is labeled for proceeding with this journey of prayer. See, at the beginning of the Christian life, after a person has the gospel explained to them-God loves you so much that he decided to make a way for you to enter a relationship with himself by sending his son Jesus into the world to die for your sins and to reconcile God to you and you to God. All you need to do is turn to God when your whole life you've been running away

from God. Now turn to God believing that God wants to give you salvation as a free gift, based solely on the death of his Son Jesus on the cross and you will be saved eternally.

After the gospel message is explained to an individual, and they receive it, they are often told that they now need to fulfill. OK? Now that you have been hired on at the factory or this office by the grace of God, God has a job description for you. And we look at this job description-our title is “Good Christian”-that is the job, being a good Christian. Where our specific responsibilities is to share our faith. Another specific responsibility is to read the Bible. And a third specific responsibility under the job description of being a good Christian is to pray. Maybe you even get the idea somehow that there are performance standards for the job description. You know, a fair performance standard for that specific responsibility of prayer might be that we prayed 15 minutes a day. And a good performance might be measured by a half an hour a day. An excellent performance would be an hour a day.

Now, let’s be honest with one another and say that that is the basic way that most of us have been introduced to the Christian life. That once we became Christians there was a specific set of responsibilities handed to us and we were told that this was your job. And we try to get on the on-ramp with that job description mentality, but we find ourselves driving by it back and forth, sometimes not very motivated. We decide to call in sick to the office- “Gee, I’m not feeling well today. I have a cold. With the job description, we take vacations from the job. Hey, weekends I’m off duty and evenings

and holidays. Sometimes we get on the road, but we run out of gas. We say, “Gee, I am not a very good Christian. I am not very motivated.”

At other times, at least a few of us have had expressed the even worse perspective that the “good Christian job description,” which is that since God has done so much for you in sending his Son into the world to die for you, can’t you do a little bit for God? The Christian life is not portrayed so much as a job description, but almost like an exchange. God trades his sacrifice for your sacrifice. And in churches where that kind of perspective is used, guilt is the big motivator. “What is the matter with you? Don’t you understand the greatness of the sacrifice of Christ? How can you not do your little bit for God since he did so much for you?”

Well I want to tell you that neither a job description mentality for prayer nor the guilt, an exchange motivation for prayer, will serve as an adequate beginning for the journey of prayer. You will never get on the road with those. And if you do get on, you will quickly run out of gas. There is one fundamental reason why people get on the journey of prayer and keep going and that is because they understand what prayer is all about. It is not a fulfillment of a job description requirement for being a good Christian. It is not your trade with God- that he made a great sacrifice for you, can’t you make a great sacrifice for him. Prayer is the linking up of our great need with God’s infinite divine resources. See, people get onto the journey of prayer because they get in touch right from the start with profound need.

It is really interesting here, but you probably don't know that when Paul says, "In all my prayers for you (verse 4)" he is using a very interesting word in the Greek. It is not the typical word for "prayer." The word that Paul is using literally means "need." What he is saying is that "In all of my experience of need, I always pray for you."

What I am trying to say, brothers and sisters, is that the journey of prayer begins precisely where the Christian life begins in a profound experience and sense of need. Why do you turn to God at all? Because you need him. And it is living in that place of need that begins the journey of praying.

Now what do I mean by living in that place of need? By need I mean that experience of a distance between what we are and what we ought to be. I see that there is this gap. I am not now what I ought to be. I experience, as I look at my life, what I really want to be like-what God wants me to be like, what the Bible tells me I should be like and what I really am like. There is this gap. And as I look around at the rest of the world, I see this incredible distance between what the church should be and what the church really is.

There is a distance between what God wants for Vineyard in the area of power to heal and what we are presently doing and what we are presently able to do. There is a distance between what God wants in world missions for this church and what we are presently practicing. There is a distance between what God wants in terms of the way we love each other and the unity in the church and what is currently going on. There is

a distance between how God wants to express the heart of this church to the poor and what is presently happening.

And as I look out at my family, I see a gap in what I want for my kids and where they are at. What I want for my marriage and where Marlene and I are at. There is this gap, this distance, and it is true in all of life. The school system is not what it ought to be. And the economy is not what it ought to be. And the way that people relate in your college classroom and at my job is not what they ought to be like. My business and my finances are not what they ought to be. Need is simply the experience of the distance between where I currently am and where I want to be or where I believe God wants me to be.

People have a variety of responses to the experience of need. I discovered that there are only four possibilities regarding this experience of the gap, this experience of distance between where we are and where we should be. The first is to pretend that there is no distance, that there is no gap. That is to deny that we have needs. We are talking about getting onto the on-ramp to the journey of prayer. And you can simply drive right by the on-ramp and say: If it begins with an experience of need, I just don't have needs. And we don't have needs as a family.

You know, the old husband and wife dialogue: Problem? There is no problem. We are as affectionate as we should be. I am as affectionate as I ought to be. The kids are fine.

Distance between what the church is and what the church ought to be? There is no distance. Our church is perfect. I am perfect. Management problems? My management style is fine.

Well, the first possibility regarding need is to live in denial. My kids are doing great. There is no problem with me sexually. I don't have a problem with my temper.

The second possibility regarding need is to acknowledge that I have needs, that we have needs, that there is this distance between what I want to be and what I am, but I can meet those needs, we can meet those needs, without reference to God. And this is the secular response to the experience of need. We look to ourselves, look to our own resources to meet whatever needs we experience. There is the secular illusion of self-sufficiency and self-confidence and self-efficacy. We can do this.

The government practices this all of the time. We are aware that there is a crime problem, but we can pass a bill and spend \$30 billion, and we took care of crime. We realize that kids are not well-educated today and that the educational system is crumbling, but we will pass this bill and no child will be left behind. This legislation will solve the problem. Yes, we have needs, but we can meet those needs, if we all just pull together and put away our partisan fighting. We can meet America's needs.

You know, churches do that all the time. Adopt a fundamentally secular approach to strategies. Churches search the scriptures and say: OK, God wants evangelism from the church and God wants world missions, and God wants us to give to the poor. And so we see that distance between where we are and where we want to be, so let's sit down and strategize. Let us create a system and we will all be able together to meet this need without reference to God whatsoever. The gap will be filled by our strategy and our intelligence and our careful systematic planning. No reference to God except there is a perfunctory word of prayer at the beginning of our planning meetings and a "in Jesus' name Amen," at the end of the planning meeting.

We could take a self-sufficient, secular approach – of course, we will find ourselves becoming very anxious and very burdened and very burned out because there just seems to be more needs than what we can handle. But that is the second approach.

The third approach is to say we have needs. I have needs, but God won't meet them and to sink into despair. We have needs as a family; our marriage is not good; I have needs in my business, our business is crumbling around us. I have my own personal issues, my own sins. I have problems with my parents. But God won't help me. And it is because of this that many people live with this sense of a great experience of need, but their fundamental view is that God won't help, that we collectively run from confrontation like the plague.

Think about it. Why is confrontation or correction so hard for so many of us? Why do so many husbands and some wives avoid communicating about the real issues facing their marriages?

- I just don't want to talk about this now.
- Don't talk to me about our lack of communication.
- Don't talk to me now about my lack of affection.
- I don't want to talk about the sexual coldness in our marriage.
- I don't want to talk about the problems with the kids.

Why do we avoid talking at a really meaningful level with our nearest neighbor, our spouse? Why? Because to talk about it just adds to my experience of pain, that experience of need that I can't do anything about and that God is not going to help me with.

Confrontation and correction is so difficult in this third category because all we are doing to one another is throwing another millstone around a person's neck who is already sinking. Better to just hydro-plane over life. Let's skim over the surface in our marriage. Let's play pretend with one another in the church and smile nicely. Let's get into a cold formal partnership where there are carefully guarded secrets, doors that you better not open, issues that we better not talk with one another about. Because to invade those spaces is simply to add our pain and throw another millstone around each other's neck. Well, that is the third possibility regarding need.

And the fourth is to say: I have a need, we have a need, and God has the resource and the willingness to meet my need if I ask. That is the place where prayer is born. This is the on-ramp to the journey. My cupboard is bare and Lord, you have hot bread to fill my cupboard and you will fill it. Prayer is the linking of my need with divine resource.

What drives prayer? It is driven out of that sense that the lost son in Luke 15 had after he left his father's house and he was living in poverty and eating pig's food. And it said no one gave him anything. And so he experienced need and then the thought came to him: You know, my father has hired servants who have bread to spare. Anyone that is around my Dad has bread to spare, so why don't I just go back to Dad?

Do you understand that the discover of needs in our life doesn't have to be such a horrible thing? Correction, challenge, and confrontation doesn't have to be a devastating blow that you must protect yourself at all costs. That God's calling on you or on us as a church doesn't have to overwhelm us. Hey, Dad, got any bread to spare? This recent trial is just one more basis for praying. Trials don't have to kill us. Not looking inside for answers. Not introspecting and trying to come up with our own solutions. Here is one more thing that I am going to bring to my father.

What I have discovered by people who have been on this journey longer than I have and you may have seen this also as you watch people whose Christian lives you respect. There is a vulnerability in their lives, a growing acknowledgment of weakness. Rather than getting progressively more self-sufficient, people who have been on this

journey seem to be in this place of a growing weakness. Have you noticed that about Christians who have been on the road for a period of time, and in whose Christian life you really respect, you say: You know this person is different than they were six or ten years ago. They are softer. They are more broken. Because they are discovering that need and pain are not such horrible things. They are willing to more and more turn into the light rather than away from it.

Because they have grasped this link between the acknowledgment of need, with God's provision, this is where prayer starts. I have needs, we have needs, and he has the bread.

So, we are on the on-ramp now, and staring the journey. Oh, it's not a job description. It just comes out of our needs and the church's needs, our family's needs. That is where it starts? Yes, that is where it starts. You live in that place all of the time. Need. And you are confident that he has the stuff. God has the provision. He has the resources.

Now, as always there are obstacles on this journey of prayer. Different stumbling blocks that Satan will throw in our way that keeps us from really moving forward in prayer. And one of those obstacles is a misconception about prayer that people hold onto. They say: Well, I don't know. I hear what you are saying about linking up God's resource with my need, but I want to tell you in my experience prayer doesn't work. I have tried what you are saying. There has been this great experience of a gap in our

lives as a family. My child has been sick for years and we have prayed. She hasn't gotten better. Prayer doesn't work.

I have been having this problem in my business or in getting a job. I prayed. My mailbox is filled with rejection letters. It doesn't work, Rich.

I am still single.

My spouse is still going ahead with the divorce.

My dad still died.

One of the great obstacles thrown in the way of a great journey of prayer is this view that it doesn't work, I have tried it. And this stumbling block springs from the misconception that prayer means getting what I want linked up with God's divine resource. That is people's narrow definition of prayer. That I am going to link up what I want with God's resource, God's provision.

I want a husband.

I want a healing.

I want \$10,000 in the mail.

I want an end to my loneliness or my singlehood.

And because we operate with this narrow definition of prayer, we are frustrated and we say: Why bother praying?

A more realistic, honest view of prayer is that God does not always give us what we want. He often does. But prayer is getting what we need. Prayer is getting what we need. And what we need is more of God in a situation. The divine resource that God gives to deal with that experience of need is himself, primarily. You see, the goal in prayer is to gain more of Christ.

Let me ask you a question: Is there any place of need that you can think of that wouldn't be met by having more of Christ? That if you could just gain Christ, if I had more of God in my marriage? Are you telling me that wouldn't help? If I had more of God in this area of temptation, are you telling me that I wouldn't be assisted? If I had more of God, if the church had more of God, if my kid's school had more of God, are you saying that wouldn't really meet the need? The resource is God himself. Well, let me give you a different kind of picture. It is the same idea. O'Hallesby in his classic book on prayer says that prayer is simply opening the door and saying to God: Come into my situation, when we have been historically saying: Stay out. Come into my situation, Jesus.

A lot of us memorized that verse from the book of Revelation that we are told that at the beginning of the Christian life that Jesus said: Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me. And we've been told that that is a salvation verse. It is. You may be a person who has historically said to Jesus: No. I don't want you in my life. But you come to this

place of need and acknowledgment of need and you say: Well, OK. I will open the door of my heart, Jesus and give you a chance. Come into the house. Come in. And Jesus is more than willing to come in. And you will get a chance to pray that way in just a minute, those of you who have been keeping Jesus at arm's length.

But what I want to tell you is that Revelation 3:20 is not just a salvation verse, it is a prayer verse. You have been keeping Jesus at arm's length from your sex life. Oh, you have prayed about it from time to time, but you need to really let him in. To gain him in that area, to gain Christ in your struggles at work, we need to gain the mind of God and the heart of God and the Spirit of God in a whole variety of areas in this church.

Prayer doesn't work? It absolutely does work. There is no situation that God won't enter if we ask him. Folks say: Well, I am not a very good pray-er. And maybe prayer works, but you know, I am not just a praying kind of person. And what people have in mind is sort of: I am not a real mystical, intuitive, poetic-type person. I am really more of an activist. I am more of an analytical person, you know? And most of the prayers that I know or love to read, you know, Emily Dickenson, they see God in little chirping birds, they spend their days in mystical contemplation. I am not like that.

There is no type of person who prays. It is a lie that you need to have a kind of personality to be a good pray-er. You just need to be a person who is in touch with need. And it doesn't matter if you are an accountant or an attorney, or a homemaker, or an artist, or a scientist. You get in touch with that distance between what you are and

what you ought to be or what a situation is and what it needs to be and you believe in the resource of God – out of that comes prayer. It could be a very poetic prayer. It could be just a flat out: As I have examined the balance sheet of my life, God, I am bankrupt. The debits completely outweigh the credits. I've got no cash flow. Help.

Well, if Satan can't convince us that we are not the right kind of person and we get over that hurdle and he can't convince us that prayer doesn't work because we begin to see that prayer always works, we can always gain more of God, then he will say: Well, you know, the circumstances are against you praying. You can get on this on-ramp, you have experienced need and you understand God has the bread, but man, there are so many obstacles in the way in terms of your schedule and your work life. You have to be in the office at 7:00 a.m. You have two toddlers. You are nursing one of the babies. You just don't have time. You are not able to express your need.

You know, I am so glad that Paul's prayer is expressed here from a jail cell where he was chained to a Roman guard. It says: It is right for me to feel this way about all of you (v.7), since I have you in my heart whether I am in chains... We are going to discover that this letter was written from jail with Paul constantly chained to a guard. It wasn't written from a place of great freedom or great amounts or privacy.

I don't know what you have in mind in terms of what is necessary for you in lengths of time for you to pray. Or the particular place that you feel you may need to pray. But don't need to set aside one hour of undisturbed time in your private prayer chapel to

pray, otherwise prayer is no good. I would encourage you to just begin to establish the discipline of starting with 10 minutes. And in the first five minutes or the first 2 minutes, v. 3, thank God, you tell God thank you for whatever is good in your life. Get fixed in your mind and acknowledge to God that you are not the source and the reason why things are going good in whatever area they are going good. Get fixed in your mind and acknowledge to God that you are not the source and the reason why things are going good, in whatever area they are going good. If you are healthy, say: thank you, God, that I am healthy. If your kids are healthy, say thank you to the Lord: If you are doing well in school, tell God that you know that sometimes you don't get what you deserve. Sometimes you do better and you are shocked by a good grade. Say thank you to God.

And then spend the next six or eight minutes unpacking your needs to the Lord. Here is another need, God, that sense of distance between what I am and what I could be. I want to unpack that before you and spread it out in front of you and gain more of you in this. I would like my "wants," but I don't know if you will give them to me. But I know that you will give me yourself.

Do that! What you will discover, what I know is that 6 minutes of unpacking your bags is not enough and the time will stretch. But don't start with an hour, as if you could just go out today and say: OK, I am going to begin this journey of learning to be a runner and so I will start with 8 miles. Start with a quarter of a mile and walk a bit. It is the same thing with the journey of prayer. Don't allow the cost to be so high or the idea that your

circumstances are so against you that you can't pray. All of you can pray. You all can pray.

Well, what keeps prayer going? We are on the road. We got on the on-ramp of need. We have driven past some obstacles on the road, some of those orange cones that they have thrown in the way. What keeps us going on this journey of prayer?

Paul mentions three things in this passage that we are going to close with quickly. Number one is the sense of partnership that we have with other people. He says in v. 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.

That word "partnership" is "koinonea." It is one of Paul's favorite words. It is sometimes translated "fellowship." It really means to be sharers together in something. We have something in common.

One of the things that keeps prayer going, particularly for other people, that kind of prayer is called intercessory prayer, where we pray for others, is this growing sense of partnership of commonness that we really are sharers together in this great adventure called Christianity. We are linked up. You do good and I do good. The church does good and my family does good. If the leaders in this church are good, we are all going

to be blessed. Why pray for leaders? Because we are partnered together. We are drawn together. This is the motivator for Paul's prayer. We are in this together.

Now, I realize in the church in the 90's this idea of being linked together as one church is really under attack. Christians are able, as many of you realize, to get on the radio and to slash at other Christians, to write books about other Christians, to write unfair things and to propagate rumors and false charges and innuendoes about other Christians to really disdain and to spit at other Christians without any sense that they are really spitting in the wind, and it is going to blow back on them. That every time I slice at a part of the church that I am linked to, that church and I are going to bleed.

Paul says: What keeps my prayers going is that I realize that I am not independent. I am not an island. I am linked to you and you are linked to me. What we have in common is more important than our differences. So I am praying for our welfare, because that splashes back on me. We are all partners together.

I can't be happy, if my wife is not doing well. I better pray for her because we are one. I can't have a happy future, if my children aren't doing well because we are one family. I can't have a good spiritual life, if I don't ask God to bless the church I attend because we are connected. The first thing that keeps prayer going is this sense of partnership.

And the second thing that keeps prayer going is a sense of confidence. V. 6, Paul says: ...because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident

of this that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion to the day of Christ Jesus.

Now verse 6 is in the context of prayer. In a moment I will share with you the need for confidence in prayer. But it could be in a secondary application be broadened out to the whole issue of our salvation. This verse is, I believe, fairly applied to the issue of your security eternally in your salvation if you trusted Christ.

Why can you be confident that you will go to heaven? Paul says: I am confident. Why? Because of your human decision? Because of your will? Because of your choice?

Brothers and sisters, human decision, human choice, human faith, human will provides no solid ground for ultimate confidence. Paul's confidence in the church and their ultimate salvation rests in God's will. He began the good work. This is my faith. And if you come to this church, you are going to hear this preached over and over again. My faith, my hope, my confidence rests in the simple fact that God has willed my salvation. It is not as if I had no part, that I did not need to respond, that there is no human role by faith and repentance. But I look back behind my faith and repentance to the will of God. I got started in this thing because he began the good work. That is what I always bank on. God is in the lead.

And Paul says: My confidence is not just that God is at the beginning of the road – he got you on the on-ramp – my confidence is at the end of the road too, calling you on. He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.

Whatever God starts, he finishes. He is not like one of those people who begins projects and then loses interest and then starts something else and then loses interest and starts something else. God is not a cosmic adolescent, who really isn't sure of his mind; who isn't sure what he wants to do with his life. God has that eternal perspective: What I start, I finish!

The reason why you are going to get there is because God began to work in your life in spite of all your stumbling, bumbling, failing, indecision, unbelief, sin, and falling short. The Lord put a hook in your mouth and he is reeling you in. You hang in there because God doesn't let go of your hand. He's got you!

The work is going to be completed on the day of Jesus Christ. As the Lord looks into his Day-Timer, he has a day marked out: "The Day I Send Jesus Christ Back For His People." That is the day when this whole work of salvation is going to be finished. It is clearly marked out in God's Day-Timer.

This is my faith, brothers and sisters. I have always believed that God is the leader in this dance that we call the Christian life. That we respond, but he initiates. He leads out. And that the weight of the thing is always on the will of God, not the will of man.

And this is what drives prayer. I can keep going in prayer because I don't feel like I am in a tug of war with God trying to get something out of God that God doesn't want. Instead, in prayer my confidence is "God, you started this thing. Now I believe you finish what you start. You are the one who set it up so that Marlene I got married. Now, I am confident that you want us to really fulfill all the purposes that you have for marriage. You started it; you are going to have to help me finish it."

Lord, you started this thing called the Christian life in my life. And I am not what I ought to be. You want me to be holy. You want me to pray. You want me to do this and that. You are going to have to help me.

You started this thing called Vineyard Columbus. Make it what it should be.

You know, that confidence that we are not in a tug of war wrestling something out of an unwilling God, but prayer is working together with the Lord to bring out his ultimate purposes in this world. It makes prayer such a joy. It can fill you with so much confidence.

I pray that way all the time as a pastor. Because I know in my heart of hearts that God called me to do what I am doing. He showed me over and over again: This is what you are called to do. And so, when I am pushed into a corner, I can appeal with confidence to God: You did this to me.

I remember years ago when we were at the other building and I first got started in ministry. We had gone to two services and I was driving to church and they had that Columbus Triathlon. It had just started. And every time I tried to cross Indianola, the road was blocked. I tried at Morse Road. I tried to cross south of there and they just wouldn't let me through. I needed to get over to the church from my house. So I was in this place of saying: God, at every corner a policeman is yelling at me saying: Get out of here. Turn around. I came to one corner and the policeman was screaming at people: Turn around. Turn around. And I could see everyone making a U-turn at the corner. It was all barricaded up because it was important for bikers to use that road on Sunday morning.

So I said to the Lord: Lord, you are the one who called me to pastor. You set me up. Now you are either going to have to get me through that policeman and the other policemen on the other corner or I am content to just go back home and go back to bed. If you don't want me there, that is fine. But I believe you do want me there because I believe you called me and you want to bring this to completion.

I got to the corner; the policeman was just about to scream at me. I said: Look, I am a pastor. My church is on the other side of this road. In a few minutes 400 people will be waiting for me to speak. You have to let me through.

He said: OK, no problem. He yelled at the other policeman: Let him through. Let him through. They took down all the barriers and everything and they are yelling up ahead to one officer to another: Let him through. Let him through.

And that is what the Lord is doing in prayer. He is saying: I am going to let you through. I am going to tear down all the obstacles in your way because you are working with me and not against me. I am ahead of you.

And the final motivation to pray for others is simply love. Vv. 7-8: It is right for me to feel this way about all of you since I have you in my heart. Whether I am in chains or defending the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

If you love other people, you pray for them. The most loving thing, husband, that you can do for your wife is to pray for her. Wife, the most loving thing you can do for your husband is to pray for him. The most loving thing, church, that you can do for me is to put me in your prayers. You love the church? Pray for the church. You love your kids? Pray for your kids. You love the school they go to, pray for it.