

## All We Need is (Real) Love

### To The Citizens of Heaven, Part 6

#### *Philippians 1:8-9*

I don't know about you, but I can't remember much of what happened 3 months ago, but I can remember a lot of things that happened 30 years ago.

I can remember one of the first times I preached as a freshman in college. I had traveled with a friend who was putting on a sacred music concert at a church on Saturday night; they asked him to preach the following Sunday morning and he suggested I do it. I did . . . I can't remember the name of the church but I remember that it was somewhere in the back hills of northern Virginia.

One of the things I do remember was how bad it went over . . . I obviously wasn't cut out for this . . . didn't matter, my goal was to teach history. But I had been reared by an expositor, missionary father . . . so I knew to take one verse at a time. Since then I've learned to take one word at a time.

And all the people said . . . Oh my . . . I mean, Amen.

I remember how this small congregation of people just sat there . . . somewhere between confused and mystified. It was painfully obvious to them I wasn't a preacher – at least not according to the standards there in the hills of Virginia.

I never took off my necktie – I didn't even loosen it; and I kept my jacket on for the entire sermon . . . they weren't used to that. To them, that wasn't really preaching.

I can still remember after the service telling my musical friend, "Man alive that went over horribly." He said to me, "Stephen, they're not used to Bible teaching . . . in fact, they actually had no idea what you were doing up there."

And then a man came toward the front where we stood – the sanctuary had nearly emptied. He was in his early 40's, dressed in a nice suit and he had a pleasant manner about him. He stuck out his hand to shake mine and said something I can't remember, but it was related to his appreciation for the sermon . . . which surprised me; and then he looked directly into my eyes and quietly said something I can still hear 35 years later; he said, "Listen, I want you to know that I am going to begin praying for you, every day, for the rest of my life."

He turned and walked away.

I didn't get his name . . . I never saw him again.

But I could tell . . . he meant every word.

I have wondered at times if he is still alive.

Many of you have had someone pray for you – someone who passed away and you felt a double loss when they did – you knew you how had one-less person who mentioned your name and your needs to God in prayer.

My mother-in-law was one of those . . . now with the Lord. If she said she was going to pray about someone or something, she meant it.

My grandmother was another – a widowed missionary for several decades.

I can still remember those sleepovers at her trailer as a little boy – I remember those cream colored coffee cups and the fact that she actually let me drink coffee . . . as a 7 year old that was pretty special.

And to this day I drink coffee the same way – a little coffee, a lot of sugar and cream. I call it, "dessert in a cup." It's the only way to drink coffee.

After breakfast she would come over and sit down and open her Bible, choose a passage to read and then let me know what it meant. Trust me; she let me know what it meant.

Then she'd pray . . . she happened to pray the longest prayers you can imagine. That's why she gave me coffee.

She would give Jonathan Edwards a run for his money.

She literally prayed around the world . . . and she prayed for me.

Always with tears . . . if you knew me then, you'd know why she was crying. They were actually tears of deep sincerity.

I have lived long enough to have outlived some faithful prayer warriors . . . people that once worshipped with us here in this assembly . . . who prayed faithfully for us . . . with names like Brinker and Horace and Melba.

In fact, the older you get, the more you realize how significant and precious it is to know people who, when they say to you, "I'm going to put you on my prayer list" you know they mean it.

By the way, for every believer, we have this astounding promise that at least one person is praying for us with incredible intensity and love. That Person is Jesus Christ (***Romans 8:34 – Even now He stands at the right hand of God the Father, interceding for us.***)

You are being prayed for at this very moment.

But isn't it wonderful when somebody on the planet models the Savior; somebody in your world, made out of the same cloth, who makes the same mistakes, who needs the same grace says, "I'm going to pray for you . . . you're going on my prayer list."

They put a face on interceding grace – how wonderful is that!

I can remember on one occasion many years ago, our oldest daughter who was around 6 or 7 years old at the time – she was in the back yard jumping on the trampoline – she was hollering to me through the back screen door for me to come out and jump on the trampoline with her . . . she wanted company.

For whatever reason I couldn't come outside and she hollered again – "Daddy, I want you to come out here and jump with me . . . I don't want to jump on the trampoline alone." To which I instinctively responded, assuming this was a great time for a little theology lesson on the omnipresence of God; I yelled, "Sweetie, just remember, God is always with

you." Silence . . . I smiled to myself . . . but then she hollered back, "Well, maybe He is, but He's not jumping."

Take that, Mr. Theologian.

In this opening paragraph as Paul writes to the citizens of heaven, living in Philippi, he affectionately writes of his love and concern for them.

He puts into flesh and blood – he puts a body and a face to the activity of Jesus Christ.

And the first personal thing he tells them in ***chapter 1 and verse 3*** is that he is always praying for them.

They're on his prayer list.

He's already informed them they are on his mind – ***verse 3***

And they are on his heart – ***verse 7***

He's effectively coming up to each of them, saying, "I want you to know, I'm praying for you every day, for the rest of my life."

And he means it.

If you pick up his letter again at ***verse 8***, he does something rare and powerful – notice, ***For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.***

Paul is making an oath – something he rarely did. He wants to drive home the truth of his affectionate and deep concern for them, and he calls God as his witness.<sup>i</sup>

How passionate is his praying for them?

He writes, ***I yearn for you all with the affection*** – the same desires – that Jesus has for you.

I long for your best, in this regard.

The phrase, I yearn for you, is a word that means to strain toward. Dwight Pentecost in his commentary on this text brought up another original context for this word as a word that illustrated the athlete nearing the finish line. He's at the front of the race, and victory appears to be his; but he hears footsteps on the track immediately behind him, and another contestant threatens to overtake him. So he strains with every muscle and nerve and fiber of his body and as he reaches the finish line, he leans forward – straining to cross the finish line first.<sup>ii</sup>

That's Paul's passion here – I am straining with everything in my being on your behalf – I am putting everything I've got into praying for you in the church at Philippi.

Now that alone would be incredibly encouraging. And that is typically where a prayer warrior might stop.

But not Paul.

Most missionaries send out prayer letters so their supporters will know how to pray for them . . . which is a wonderful plan.

But Paul is sending this supporting church his prayer list so that they know how he is praying for them!

Paul is literally opening his prayer journal and showing them – look, this and this and this and that is exactly what I’m longing to see happen in your life.

And by the way, these are the same things that God wants to develop in our own lives today.

If you could read, as it were, from the prayer list of Jesus Christ, you would find the same elements He inspired by His Spirit through the Apostle Paul.

In fact, Paul implied it didn’t he – at the end of this verse – these deep longings I have for you are the affections that Jesus Christ has for you as well.

In other words, my longing for your originates in Jesus Christ.

Let me put it this way: if you’ve ever wondered what Jesus might have on His prayer list for you – here it is.

Paul is giving us his Prayer List – for them – and for us.

**There are at least 9 prayer requests listed here; we’ll cover three of them today and six of them next Sunday.**

If that math doesn’t seem to make sense to you . . . it doesn’t make sense to me either . . . we’ll just see what happens.

Now I want to recommend you circle or even write these prayer items as your own prayer requests:

- for your family members and believing friends;
- for your pastors/elders,
- your deacons, teachers, youth leaders, nursery volunteers
- for you entire church family, as Paul does here
- and pray them for yourself.

This is an inspired prayer list . . . that originates in the heart of Jesus Christ and flows through the flesh and blood intercessor, the Apostle Paul.

The first prayer request Paul prays for with regard to the Philippian believers, is:

## 1. Their Passion in Life

***Notice verse 9. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more.***

The word **abound** perisseuo (περισσεύω) in the present tense is progressive and it expresses the idea of continuing, overflowing, abounding love.<sup>iii</sup>

That kind of love isn’t sentimental . . . it isn’t a few warm fuzzies here or there . . . it’s the word agape (ἀγάπη) for deep, undying commitment.

In other words, Paul says, “I am praying every day for you – that your love will overflow the banks of your heart and life.”

I want your life to become a rushing Niagara Falls of rushing, overflowing, cascading commitment.

And I’ve got to point out the interesting fact that agape here has no object in this text. Paul isn’t saying, “That your love *for me may abound.*” *He doesn’t even say, “that your love for God may abound”;* or “That your love *for each other . . . or for the world . . . or for the word . . . or for your family . . .*” may abound.

Paul doesn’t specify the object of your love . . . which means that Paul is actually telling them that all the above would be true.

In other words, in every dimension of life we are to demonstrate a lavish, ongoing, limitless love – one author writes – an unremitting geyser of love to God and a flood of love that overflows to everybody else.<sup>iv</sup>

The old Latin commentator, Bengel writes of this text, “The fire in the apostle never says, “It is enough.” Paul is saying, more love . . . more love.<sup>v</sup>

Elizabeth Prentiss captured this unremitting love for Christ which then overflows to everyone else in a hymn known a generation ago, but worth learning all over again.

Taken from the prayer list of Paul here in this text, she wrote the lyrics:

*More love to Thee, O Christ, more love to Thee;  
Hear Thou the prayer I make, on bended knee;  
This is my earnest plea, more love, O Christ to Thee,  
More love Thee . . . more love to Thee.<sup>vi</sup>*

Listen, wouldn’t this first prayer request take care of everything else?

I mean, if we really loved God and each other wouldn't we be discerning and pure and blameless and fruitful and committed to each other?

I mean, if we love each other as Paul will exhort the Philippian believers over and over again, wouldn't that cover everything?

Well, it depends on how you define love.

My son had planned to get married in Israel . . . you may remember. A conflict broke out in that part of the Middle East and we had to change our plans.

Now my son and future daughter in law have a destination wedding without a wedding.

They talked it over, and in the meantime, United Airlines reimbursed us for the amount of the tickets. That was a miracle.

Seth and Megan talked it over and decided they wanted to go ahead with a destination wedding – besides, there was no rented facility, no bridesmaids or groomsmen . . . everything had been put into the destination. I asked Seth, well, son, where do you guys want to go? He said, “We talked it over and decided that since we've both wanted to go to the Grand Canyon that would be the place to go.” I was fine with that. Arizona is cheaper than Israel . . . and a lot closer.

We had been advised to stay in Sedona – a place that ended up being as amazing as the Grand Canyon. Sedona is an area where massive rock formations jut up from the landscape. They are the size of skyscrapers, in colors of purple and orange and brown. It was absolutely jaw dropping spectacular.

We loved it.

My wife and I have often mentioned upon returning how much we loved Sedona.

But define love.

We don't love Sedona enough to live there . . . in fact, we don't really love it so much that we want to even go back there.

I mean, we loved it while we were there . . . but we're fine if we never fly into Phoenix, Arizona again – where it was 117 degrees in the shade.

We're fine if we only see a postcard of Sedona, Arizona or a photograph of the Grand Canyon.

I know we're on the radio in Arizona . . . and if you're listening, we'd love to see you . . . okay, not really . . . at least not in Arizona . . . come to Cary.

You see, I have a tourist-kind-of-love for Sedona, Arizona.

It's possible to be a Christian and have that same kind of “love” for the church.

In a recent publication, one author talked about a trip she took with her husband to Europe. In 3 ½ weeks they visited thirteen different nations. She wrote, “When we'd enter a country, we'd get our passports stamped, exchange currencies, learn a few key phrases, and then off we'd go to visit the natives.

We'd wander through outdoor markets, peruse museums, and sample the cuisine. We'd exchange a few niceties with the locals, sit on the steps of cathedrals, take a picture or two, purchase a little something to remind us of our times there, and then we were off.

We had a wonderful time; our hearts weren't changed in any significant ways by our little visits, but they weren't meant to be – we were tourists.

She goes on – it seems to me that this might be the average Christian's understanding of the local church. [Is it possible that] on any given weekend, many tourists can be found in church. They pop in for an hour, sing a chorus or two and exchange niceties with the locals. They sample some of the local cuisine, purchase a book or CD to remind them of their visit and then they race to their cars to get to their favorite restaurant or home before the game.

For many people, the church is simply a tourist stop – and our land is filled with tourist-friendly churches.<sup>vii</sup>

Paul is demonstrating a prayer life that looks nothing like a tourist stop in the body of Christ.

He's describing a church body that views itself as critically essential in the growth and development of the believer and the concentrated outgrowth of the gospel.

Paul is referring to the kind of passionate love that bothers enough to take up residency. You see, agape is a love that moves in and settles down and rolls up its sleeves . . . and endures the heat of

discipleship and servanthood and spiritual disciplines.

Paul is very aware that if he simply tells us to effectively abound in our passionate love-commitment to God and others – we might come up with a variety of misconceptions.

So he basically adds to his prayer list some prayer requests that take us deeper in defining life and love.

Paul not only prays for the believer's passion in life; secondly, Paul prays for:

## 2. Their Progress in Life

Paul says, ***“I am praying for your love to abound more and more, notice, with knowledge”***.

The word used here for knowledge is used without exception in the New Testament for spiritual issues – the knowledge of God; the knowledge of spiritual truth; the knowledge of doctrine – it's a knowledge that comes from the study of God's word.<sup>viii</sup>

In other words, Paul wants these believers to learn more about God because when they do, their love for Him will be deeper and richer and more grateful.

Paul is also saying to the Philippians, “I'm longing for you all to develop in your knowledge of love – and not just whatever you think love might be – or what others consider love, but true, knowledgeable, spiritually originating, biblical love.”

Which means true love isn't really blind after all; its eyes are wide open.

The famous sentimental song from the 60's that sang, “All you need is love...” – sold millions. “All you need is love . . . to be all you were meant to be . . . all you need is love.”

That isn't really a good idea, because you might just want to love yourself more than anybody else but that isn't good.

You might love money more than you love the law and so you spend your life stealing it, counterfeiting it and that isn't good.

You might love chocolate covered doughnuts more than vegetables; but that isn't good . . . is it? Should we take a vote? I mean, it's a great way to die young, with a smile on your face, but it's not a very good kind of love.

You might love women more than you love morals and break up one life after another and maybe even a marriage or two while you're at it – that wouldn't be good.

All we need *isn't* just what we might love . . . what we *need* is the *right* kind of love.

Which is why Paul follows up overflowing love with the idea of love defined according to biblical knowledge.

Listen, no matter what your feelings tell you – no matter what your culture approves and applauds – no impulse – no inner feeling or passion that leads you to disobey scripture can be blessed by God as biblical love.<sup>ix</sup>

True love won't argue with the truth about love from the Creator of love.

In other words, any so-called love that denies God's word isn't love. God's word clearly condemns all sexual activity – even in the name of love – except between a husband and his wife – for that bed is undefiled (Hebrews 13:4).

Anything beyond that is masquerading as love – and how do we know that objectively? We know that, because it is a love that goes beyond the boundary of knowledgeable love, which Paul refers to here.

- It might be *storge* – a Greek word for love that loves with strong family feelings.
- It might be *philia* – a love that shares deep affection and commonality
- It might be *eros* – a love bound by sexual desire

These were extremely popular first century words for love.

But Paul uses the word *agape* here in this text – the highest form of commitment and fidelity, which then serves as a boundary for allowable sexual intimacy and family commitment and deep affection.

You see, Paul knew the Philippian culture would know all about those words and those expressions for love.

Most people think Paul must have lived in some primitive world that would never understand ours.

Listen, our world is becoming like his world more and more all the time.

Adultery, the acceptance of mistresses, polygamy, pornography, homosexuality, promiscuity, one-night stands between strangers, all kinds of fornication – all these forms of sexual experiences and experiments were applauded by the Roman Empire.

And Paul didn't stick his head in the sand either.

He knew his generation would have to learn the boundaries of a brand new kind of love – a biblical love.

Which is one of the primary reasons you have little use of agape by secular writers in Paul's day; but it happens to be the most often word used in the New Testament – more than 300 times to:

- Describe God's love for the world; ***For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16)***
- Agape is used to describe a husband's love for his wife & the love of Christ for His church – ***Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25);***
- It's the word used to describe God's love for the sinner (***Romans 5:8 – God showed His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us;***
- Agape is the word used of God's love for the believer (***Romans 8:35 – who shall separate us from the love of Christ? And the answer is? Nothing will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39)***)

Listen, the truth is, our sinful nature knows nothing of biblical love.

Everything we thought we knew about love has to be relearned . . . redefined . . . reconstructed now that we've been forgiven.

And much of what we've been forgiven of – and will still be forgiven of day in and day out – is loving the wrong way.

No wonder Paul is earnestly praying that believers – then and now – “I'm praying with every ounce of strength I have and every fiber in my being that you will progress in learning how to love and how to live according to biblical knowledge.”

Relationships make up the majority of our lives . . . so progress in learning how to relate to others in life – in knowledgeable, biblical love.

Thirdly, Paul is also praying – not only about their passion in life; for their progress in life, he's also praying for:

### 3. Their Practice in Life

In other words, how are these believers in Philippi – and us – to handle the daily issues and pressures of life biblically?

Paul writes in *verse 9*. ***And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.***

There's his third prayer request – for us to be discerning.

What does it mean to be discerning.

Paul uses a word here that never again appears in the New Testament.

It's the word *aisthesis* (αἰσθησις) and you can translate it sensibility or insight.<sup>x</sup>

It's a word that broadly refers to the application of biblical knowledge.

Which makes sense in Paul's progressive prayer list. Paul is praying that they will learn Biblical principle, and from that develop the Biblical practice.

The truth is, unless you believe correctly, you'll not behave correctly.

So Paul prays that we might *possess* the truth – that's knowledge; and then that we might *practice* the truth – that's discernment.

You see the problem with the average Christian isn't that we don't *know* the truth; it's that we don't want to apply the truth we know.

So, the solution isn't just learning more; it's doing what we're learning, more often.

One commentator writes, this word for discernment refers to a high level of biblical, theological, moral and spiritual perception and implies the right application of God's revelation which then produces holy living.<sup>xi</sup>

I think the best synonym for this word *discernment* is indeed the word *insight*.

Maybe you're thinking, it would be great to see this word played out in living color . . . well, the good news is, even though this Greek word appears only here in the New Testament, it appears 22 times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament book of Proverbs.

Go dig in there sometime . . . there are 31 chapters . . . read one chapter a day and in a month's time you'll be introduced over and over again to biblical insight which produces biblical conduct.

One author said, a discerning person is that man or woman or young person who learns to live for things that count and things that last.<sup>xii</sup>

When John Wesley went away to study at Oxford in June of 1720, his godly mother Susanna wisely wrote in one of her letters to him, "Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off the delight for spiritual things, whatever increases the authority of your body over your mind, that thing is sin."<sup>xiii</sup>

This was her prayer list for her son . . . this is the beginning of Paul's prayer list for you and me.

I close with this, from an interview between Jon Eareckson Tada and World Magazine; after living as a quadriplegic for 45 years, she reflected in this interview on the diving accident that changed her life. As a 14-year-old she had embraced Jesus as her Savior, but in her words, she had "confused the abundant Christian life with the great American dream."

Joni said, "I [planned to] lose weight, get good grades, get voted captain of the hockey team, go to

college, marry a wonderful man who made \$250,000 a year, and we'd have 2.5 children. It was all me focused: What can God do for me? I almost thought that I had done God a great big favor by accepting Jesus . . . [And my boyfriend and I] were doing some things together that we knew were sinful.

In April 1967, I came home from an immoral Friday night date and cried, "Oh God . . . I am staining your reputation by saying I'm a Christian, yet doing one thing Friday night and another thing on Sunday morning. I'm a hypocrite . . . I want you to change my life . . . do something in my life that will jerk it right side up because I'm making a mess of the Christian faith . . . I don't want that. I want to glorify you." Three months later I had the diving accident [that has left me paralyzed from the neck down].

Immediately after the accident, Joni said in this interview that she told God, "You'll never be trusted with another one of my prayers." But after struggling with anguish and anger – wanting to die . . . hating her condition – Joni said, "I finally prayed one short prayer that changed my life: it was simply this – 'Oh God, if I can't die, show me how to live.' That was probably the most powerful prayer I had ever prayed."<sup>xiv</sup>

That's the prayer Paul is praying for them . . . and for you and me.

- to overflow in love;
- to progress in learning the biblical truth about love and life;
- to practice applying what we're learning.

To put it more simply – Paul is fervently praying, "Lord . . . teach them how to love; teach them what they need to know; so they can know how they ought to live.

With love . . . knowledge and insight . . . living ultimately with more to Thee oh Christ, more love to Thee.

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- i Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, Philippians (Crossway, 2007), p. 35
- ii J. Dwight Pentecost, The Joy of Living: A Study of Philippians (Lamplighter Books, 1973), p. 22
- iii Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, The Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 545
- iv Adapted from Hughes, p. 40
- v Quoted by Hughes, p. 40
- vi Elizabeth Prentiss, *More Love to The*, Published in 1870
- vii Adapted from Elyse Fitzpatrick, Because He Loves Me (Crossway, 2010), p. 173
- viii James Montgomery Boice, Philippians (Baker, 2000), p. 46
- ix Adapted from John MacArthur, Philippians (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 46
- x Rienecker/Rogers, p. 353
- xi MacArthur, p. 46
- xii Adapted from Dennis E. Johnson, Philippians (P & R Publishing, 2013), p. 46
- xiii Sam Gordon, An Odyssey of Joy: Philippians (Ambassador, 2004), p. 38
- xiv Marvin Olasky, "Loving Life", World Magazine, January 12, 2013