

349 “until the day of Jesus Christ”

At the start of his various epistles to the new young Christian churches Paul tends to follow a fairly set routine, as we see in the Epistle to the Philippians which serves as a good example.

He starts by saying who the epistle is from – usually Paul and one or two companions – and who it is addressed to – for example “the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi” (Philippians 1.1). Then he uses his most common greeting – “Grace [be] unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and [from] the Lord Jesus Christ” (1.2, KJV). We can imagine the excited reaction at Philippi, for here is a letter from Paul himself, who respects and greets them as fellow saints in the Lord and is now giving them his careful attention.

The scene being set, Paul speaks of his prayers for them all - “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you” (1.3). What an encouragement that must have been – that the great apostle Paul was thankful for them, even them, for their “fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now” (v.5). He prays for them always, making his requests for them with joy (v.4).

As we follow in the footsteps of the first recipients of these epistles, we learn so much by then looking carefully at the substance of Paul’s various prayers for these young Christian fellowships. Across the epistles we find there are both common themes as well as specific prayer requests, depending on the particular situations of the local churches.

So we come in our example to Paul’s prayers for the Philippian saints. First he explains that he is - “confident of this very thing, that he (God the Father) who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (from 1.6, KJV).

For the Philippians and for us, here is recognition that none of us is as yet “the finished article”! God is continuing His gracious work of “sanctification” in each of us and all of us, and will see this task through until “the day of Christ”. This last phrase refers to the promised return of Jesus as Lord and Judge, which we know consists of two stages: the “seizing away” of the true Church, known as the Rapture (as in I Thessalonians 4.13-18), followed by Jesus’ return in power and glory to rescue His original covenant people the Jews at the end of the 7-year period of antichrist and tribulation (eg., Matthew 24.29-31 and parallels).

Then, in Philippians 1.9-11, Paul continues with the substance of his prayers for the Philippians. He prays that their love may abound “yet more and more in knowledge and [in] all judgment” (v.9); that is, as part of the wider sanctification process, may they “grow up in the Lord” in terms of their spiritual knowledge and judgment (akin to the “wisdom” so emphasised in the Book of Proverbs).

This growing-up will inform and stimulate their practical love, and will enable them to “approve those things that are excellent” in their daily lives and decision-making (v.10a). All this means that when the first stage of “the day of Christ” does come, (the Rapture), the saints of Philippi then, and the saints of anywhere now, will be found “sincere” (the Greek word involves being examined in bright sunshine and found pure), without blame, and “filled with the fruits of righteousness” (vv.10b-11). Those fruits, with that purity and blamelessness, will be clear evidence that God the Father will indeed have been performing His “good work” within the lives of His saints, just as Paul knew that He would do.

We are living in increasingly chaotic times with disasters present or future, great or small, near or far, dominating the 24-hour news bulletins; (and in Britain how we need to keep “praying without ceasing” for God’s mercy on this nation in the coming weeks, as in I Thessalonians 5.17). But those bulletins totally ignore Almighty God, and His Son and His Word, and His promises and His sovereignty, and that “good work” with which He is still steadily involved among His Christ-redeemed people. How true are William Longstaff’s words from that old hymn – “Take time to be holy, the world rushes on ...”.

Our responsibility is to accept within our lives and situations our own need for the Father’s ongoing sanctification of us through Christ. He remains as the Potter and we remain as the clay (as in Romans 9.21), and sometimes life for the clay can be uncomfortable, and needs to be, as the gracious hands of the divine Potter do their skilful work. Are there aspects of our own lives in which we sense that the Potter is particularly concerned, positively or negatively, at present?

God our Father knows what He is doing, and we can be sure that in the midst of everything else that is going on, or may go on in the future, He will continue to perform His good work within us “until the day of Jesus Christ”.

Psalm 113.1-3.

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