



Be still.

Overcoming the Hurdles

from “A Call to Spiritual Reformation” by D. A. Carson (Philippians 1:9-11)

All of us recognise that some believers are gifted with a peculiar ministry of prayer. While William Carey is often referred to as “the father of modern missions”, it was his sister, bedridden for years, who spent hours each day interceding for the ministry of her brother and for others who were beginning to follow the trail he blazed. George Müller of Bristol was extraordinarily gifted in prayer.

Still, we have come far enough to recognise that we cannot justify our relative prayerlessness by saying that those who are peculiarly effective are more gifted than we. Wherever we stand in the spectrum of Christian maturation, we could do better than we do, and many of us could do much better. One of the most important steps we can take is to recognise where we are. We quietly confess that we are dangerously dry. Our knowledge of God is slight, and we long to pray with a greater sense of reality and a greater degree of fruitfulness. We want to learn how to pray.

Few of Paul’s prayers have greater potential to help us surmount the hurdles of spiritual dryness and lack of faith than the one in Philippians 1:9-11. It can help us overcome our excuses for prayerlessness.

Paul prays for what is excellent.

At one level, one could say that what Paul is asking God for is constantly increasing love: “And this is my prayer,” he writes, “that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight” (1:9). But as one reads on, it becomes clear that, at least in this prayer, the love for which Paul prays is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Paul tells the Philippians that he prays that their love may increase “so that



[they] may be able to discern what is best” (v.10).

We have not yet unpacked exactly what these excellent things are; nor have we explored how an increase in love moves the church toward the goal of approving these excellent things, the best things. What is immediately clear, however, is that Paul’s prayer spells the death of entrenched mediocrity, of smug self-satisfaction, of contentment with our own excuses. Paul prays for what is excellent.

Paul does not expect excellence to be dropped on the church in a package.

He prays that believers may discern and approve what is best, that is, that they may experientially test and thereby approve what is best. But what are these distinguishing things, these excellent things for which Paul prays?

“Shine forth in my spirit, that I may feel Thy love to me filling my heart!”

**“I SHALL BE SATISFIED WHEN I AWAKE WITH THY LIKENESS.”
PSALM 17:15**

The excellence he wants the Philippian believers to pursue is not easily discerned. To discern and approve what is excellent, Christians must be characterised by this abounding love. That is why he prays for such love.

Why does Paul describe Christian love in exactly this way?

Love that “abounds more and more” is plain enough, but what about love that “abounds more and more in knowledge and depth of insight”? Perhaps we will get at Paul’s point rather quickly if we replace the phrase with the opposite qualities. Paul does not pray that their love might “abound more and more in ignorance and insensitivity” or in “stupidity and ham-fistedness” or in “cheap sentimentality and myopic nostalgia.” He prays, rather, that their love might “abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.” The ever-increasing love for which Paul prays is to be discriminating. It is to be constrained by “knowledge” and “depth of insight.” Without the constraints of knowledge and insight, love very easily degenerates into mawkish sentimentality or into the kind of mushy pluralism the world often confuses with love. Christian love will be accompanied by “knowledge”—that is, in Paul’s use, that mature grasp of the meaning of the gospel that is the fruit of sound instruction and full experience. Christian love is also accompanied by (literally) “all insight”: the “all” does not here signal total insight or “depth of insight” (NIV), but breadth of insight—that is, **moral perception across the entire gamut of life’s experiences.**

Clearly, knowledge and discernment without love could easily become supercilious, overbearing, casuistical. But love without knowledge and discernment is soon a parody of

itself. The Christian love for which Paul prays is regulated by knowledge of the gospel and comprehensive moral insight. These constraints do not stifle love. Far from it: they ensure its purity and value. Such love, Paul insists, must abound more and more.

Paul simply assumes that unless your love is abounding more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, **you will not be able to discern and approve what is best.** So “what is best” must be delicate or subtle or difficult to spot to those whose love is not abounding in this way. Paul’s thought here is that there are countless decisions in life where it is not a question of making a straightforward decision between right and wrong. What you need is the extraordinary discernment that helps you perceive how things differ, and then make the best possible choice. (“Discern what is best” has also been rendered “approve the things that really matter” and “develop a sense of what is vital”).

In verse 6 of this chapter, Paul tells the Philippians that he always prays for them with joy, because he is confident “that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” In other words, he does not envisage mere maintenance of the Philippians’ faith, but **positive improvement in their discipleship**, until it is capped by the perfection effected by the last day, the day of Jesus Christ.

If we may judge from his own example, Paul’s confidence that the Lord will bring about such growth does not in the least diminish the need for personal resolution to grow. Thus, two chapters later the apostle testifies to his own aim: **“I want to know Christ and the power of this resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead”** (3:10-11). Then he explains just where he sees himself in this process: “not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (3:11-14).

Considering these thoughts, the nature of the excellent things Paul wants believers to pursue, of “what is best,” comes into focus. It is nothing less than all the elements characteristic of maturing Christian discipleship, and we cannot discern and approve them unless our love abounds more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. “What is best” includes increasing experience of the power of the resurrection and increasing participation in Christ’s sufferings. Above all, these excellent things result in a growing knowledge of Jesus Christ (Phil 3:10), in anticipation of the day of Christ when all of God’s good work in us is brought to culmination.

Pursuing what is best.

The pursuit of such excellence does not turn on transparent distinctions between right and wrong. It turns rather on delicate choices that

reflect one’s entire value system, one’s entire set of priorities, one’s heart and mind. That is why Paul prays that the love of the Philippians might abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight: he wants their hearts and minds to become profoundly Christian, for otherwise they will not discern and approve what is best.

Perhaps some practical examples will help clarify Paul’s prayer.

What do you do with your time? How many hours a week do you spend with your children? Have you spent any time in the past two months witnessing to someone about the gospel? How much time have you spent watching television or in other forms of personal relaxation? Are you committed, in your use of time, to what is best?

What have you read in the past six months? If you have found time for newspapers and news magazines, a couple of whodunits, a novel or two or perhaps read a trade journal, have you also found time for reading a commentary or some other Christian literature that will help you better understand the Bible or improve your spiritual discipline or broaden your horizons? Are you committed, in your reading habits, to what is best?

How are your relationships within your family? Do you pause now and then and reflectively think through what you can do to strengthen ties with your spouse and with your children?

Do you make time for personal prayer? For prayer meetings? Have you taken steps to improve in this regard?

How do you decide what to do with your money? Do you give a set percentage, say 10 percent, of your income to the Lord’s work, however begrudgingly, and then regard the rest of your income as your own? Or do you regard yourself as the Lord’s steward, so that all the money you earn is ultimately his? Are you delighted when you find yourself able to put much more of your money into strategic ministry, simply because you love to invest in eternity?

Has your compassion deepened over the years, so that, far from becoming more cynical, you try to take concrete steps to serve those who have less than you do?

Is your reading and study of the Bible so improving your knowledge of God that your wholehearted worship of the Almighty grows in spontaneity, devotion, and joy?

At what points in your life do you cheerfully decide, for no other reason than that you are a Christian, to step outside your “comfort zone,” living and serving in painful or difficult self-denial?

Behind your answers to all of these questions are choices. The last thing I want to do is generate a load of guilt because of the choices constantly before us, choices we frequently fail to exploit for the glory of God. In fact, I hesitated over including these paragraphs for just that reason. **Feelings of guilt will not by themselves help us to make the right choices; they may simply increase our stress and resentments.**

But if our love abounds more and more, shaped all the while by knowledge and moral insight, then these are the kinds of choices we will be

wanting to make—and we will be wanting to make them well. They are the kinds of choices that cannot be made on the basis of mere law. They spring from a heart transformed by God’s grace.

“Ah,” you reply, “since God demands that we love him with heart, soul, mind, and strength, since he demands that we be holy as he is holy, is not the goal of such perfection demanded by God? Don’t the choices you are talking about come our way because God demands our total allegiance? So isn’t it simply a question of obeying his demands, his law?”

If by God’s law you mean his demands that we submit without reservation to his lordship and aim for perfect obedience, then of course you are right. But my point is that mere statutes, mere case law, cannot possibly cover all the cases. Consider, for example, our use of time. Each of us has twenty-four hours a day to spend. But each of us needs different amounts of sleep. We vary in our ability to concentrate—and each one varies in that particular balance of our time, rest, and experience. To “redeem the time because the days are evil” may signal quite different things to different Christians, both in the number of hours they invest and in the ways they invest them. The call to use time wisely may suggest to activist Christians that they slow down and learn to intercede with God; to reflective, meditative Christians, it may become a challenge to active evangelism or work among the poor. How should the time reserved for relaxation be used? The mature Christian may relax by memorising some Scripture, reading a Puritan classic, or perusing a fresh commentary on Isaiah. But would a Christian necessarily be less mature if he or she picked a whodunit to read? Would one want to say that less mature Christians have actually fallen into sin just because they do not use leisure time quite so profitably?

Paul’s prayer cuts through this tangle.

What he wants Christians to pray for, at every stage of their spiritual pilgrimage, is excellence, “what is best.” Of course, the pursuit of what is best can never be carried on without constant appeal to the standard of God’s gracious self-disclosure in the Scriptures. Even so, Paul refuses to set up an arbitrary set of checkpoints against which Christians are to measure themselves; he refuses to erect hoops through which believers must jump. Rather, he simply prays to his heavenly Father and asks him that these believers may pursue what is best. Knowing full well that they cannot pursue excellence without transformed hearts and minds, he further specifies, in his prayer, that God will make their love abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that they will be *able to discern* what is best.

Paul cannot be satisfied with the status quo.

Knowing that we are destined for the perfection to be achieved when Christ returns, already Paul wants us to press toward it. He cannot be lackadaisical in his praying, because the more fruitful and the more holy he becomes, the more he perceives how much farther he has to go; and he wants the Philippian believers to share the same vision. **In short, Paul is passionate about pursuing spiritual excellence, and as he pursues it himself (3:10-14) so he prays for it for others (1:9-11).** ■

ZEAL

From THE SOUL-WINNER'S SECRET
by SAMUEL LOGAN BRENGLE

It is said that Sheridan went to battle with all the fury of a madman, and recklessly exposed himself to the shot and shell of the enemy. He told General Horace Porter that he never went into a battle from which he cared to come back alive unless he came as a victor. This desperation made him an irresistible inspiration to his own troops, and enabled him to hurl them like thunderbolts against his foes. If he became so desperate in killing men, *how much more desperate, if possible, should we become in our effort and desire to save them!*

It was written of Jesus, "The zeal of Thine house hath eaten me up," and so it can be of every great soul-winner.

Not until a man can say with Paul, "Neither count I my life dear unto myself;" and "I am ready to die for the name of the Lord Jesus," can he hope to be largely used in winning souls. He that is anxious about his dinner and eager to get to bed at a reasonable hour and concerned about his salary, and oversolicitous about his health, and querulous about his reputation, and the respectability and financial condition of his appointment, and afraid of weariness and painfulness and headache and heartache, and a sore throat, may make a very respectable field officer or parson, but not a great soul-winner. There are various kinds of zeal which should be avoided as deadly evils...

First: Partial zeal like that of Jehu. (2 Kings 10:15-31.) God set him to destroy the wicked house of Ahab and the worship of Baal, and he did so with fury, "but Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the God of Israel with all his heart, for he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam which made Israel to sin," and in due time God had to cut off his house as well.

This kind of zeal is frequently seen in those who violently attack one sort of sin, while probably they themselves are secretly indulging in some other sin. Such people are usually not only intolerant of the sin, but also of the sinner, while *true zeal makes one infinitely tender and patient towards the sinner, while absolutely uncompromising with his sin.*

Second: Party zeal like that of the Pharisees and Sadducees. In these days it takes the form of excessive sectarian and denominational zeal, and makes bigots of men. Zeal for the particular church or organisation to which one belongs is right within certain limits. We are converted through the instrumentality of a certain religious organisation, and we become children of its household, or we are led into

it by the Holy Spirit through a blessed, divine affinity with its members, methods, spirit and doctrine, and we should in that case be loyal and true to its leaders who are over us in the Lord and who watch for our souls, and follow them as they follow Christ. We should also be loyal to the principles of the organisation so far as they harmonise with the word of God, and we should seek in all true ways, by prayer and supplication and ceaselessly zealous work to build up this organisation in holiness and righteousness, and this we can do with all our might, if we do it in the Holy Spirit, and can be assured that God is well pleased with us. But we must at the same time beware of a party spirit that would despise other work and workers or tear them down that we may rise on their ruins. Such zeal is from beneath and not from above. It is contrary to that love which "seeketh not her own," and looketh not upon her own things, but "also upon the things of others," and will come back, boomerang-like, upon our own pates, and bring ruin upon ourselves.

*"For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man's mind,
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind."*

And true zeal makes men like that.

Third: The zeal of ignorance. Paul said of his kinsmen, the Jews, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved, for I bear them record that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge, for they, being ignorant of God's righteousness and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God (Romans 10:1-3.)

True zeal is from above. Its source is in the mountains of the Lord's holiness, and its springing fountains in the deep cool valleys of humility. It is born of the Holy Spirit and springs from a knowledge of "the truth as it is in Jesus." This knowledge is twofold:

First: It is the knowledge of the dread condition of the sinner without Christ — his slavery to Satan; the inherited depravity of his nature; his bondage to sin, his love of it; his enmity toward God, of which he is probably not aware; his guilt; his helplessness and his ignorance of the way back to his Heavenly Father's house and happiness, and his awful danger, if he neglects the offer of salvation and life in Jesus Christ.

Second: It is the knowledge of the unspeakable gift of God, of the possibilities of grace for the vilest sinner, of the Father's pitying, yearning love, of sins forgiven, guilt removed, adoption into the Father's family, illumination, consolation, guidance, keeping, depravity destroyed, cleansing through the Blood, sanctification by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, of salvation, from the uttermost to the uttermost; of unbroken fellowship with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ through the eternal Spirit, of a life of blessed service and fruit-bearing and of a

faith and hope that bear the spirit up over sorrows and trials and losses and pain and sickness, enabling it at last to cry out in supreme victory and holy triumph: "O Death, where is thy sting, O grave, where is thy victory? Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

True zeal makes one faithful to Jesus and the souls for whom He died. It led Paul during his three years' appointment at Ephesus "to warn everyone night and day with tears to serve the Lord with all humility," to keep back no truth that was profitable for the people, but to show them and teach them "publicly and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." (Acts 20.) He was not content simply to get sinners to accept Jesus as their Saviour, but taught them that "Christ in you is the hope of glory, whom we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus, whereunto I labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily." (Colossians 7:29.) Paul was jealous for the perfection in love and loyalty of all his converts, and his zeal led him to seek with all his might to lead them all into this blessed experience. And as was Paul, so also was Baxter, who laboured indefatigably in spite of lifelong sickness, and at times almost in intolerable pain, for the perfection of his people.

And so also was Wesley and Fox and General and Mrs. Booth, and so will be every soul-winner who is full of the zeal of God.

True zeal is sacrificial. Jesus, consumed with zeal for the glory of God in the saving and sanctifying of men, "was led as a lamb to the slaughter."

Isaiah, who foresaw the humiliation and sacrificial life and death of Jesus, said by inspiration, "I gave my back to the smiters and my cheek to them that plucked off the hair; I hid not my face from shame and spitting." And again Isaiah said, "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; He was despised and we esteemed Him not."

Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed. The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53.) He poured out His soul unto death for us, He gave His life a ransom for men. Bless His name! **And the gift of His Spirit kindles and sustains this same sacrificial zeal in the hearts of all true soul-winners.**

*"Enlarge, inflame and fill my heart
With boundless charity divine,
So shall all my strength exert.
And love them with a zeal like Thine;
And lead them to Thy open side.
The sheep for whom their Shepherd died."*

THE CHICAGO FIRE AND ITS RESULTS

from "The Life of Dwight L. Moody" by William R. Moody (His Son)

In the spring of 1871, Mr. Moody went on a trip to California. On his return to Chicago the weather had become very hot, his audience was scattered, and it seemed almost impossible to get them together again. For some time he considered the means of getting hold of them again.

After praying over it the thought came to him: "Preach to them upon Bible characters." Inside of five weeks he had large congregations.

When he came to the study of Christ he intended to devote six nights to His life. He had been spending four Sunday nights on the subject, and had traced His career from the manger to His arrest and trial. On the fifth Sunday night, October 8th, he preached to the largest congregation that he had ever addressed in that city, having taken for his text, **"What then shall I do with Jesus which is called Christ?"** After preaching — or talking, as he did not call it preaching then — with all his power of entreaty, presenting Christ as a Saviour and Redeemer, he said: "I wish you would take this text home with you and turn it over in your minds during the week, and next Sabbath we will come to Calvary and the cross, and we will decide what to do with Jesus of Nazareth."

"What a mistake!" he said, in relating the story to a large audience in Chicago on the twenty-second anniversary of the great fire in that city in 1871; "I have never dared to give an audience a week to think of their salvation since. If they were lost they might rise up in judgment against me. I remember Mr. Sankey's singing, and how his voice rang when he came to that pleading verse:

*"Today the Saviour calls,
For refuge fly!
The storm of Justice falls,
And death is nigh!"*

"I have never seen that congregation since. I have hard work to keep back the tears today. I have looked over this audience, and not a single one is here that I preached to that night. I have a great many old friends and am pretty well acquainted in Chicago, but twenty-two years have passed away, and I have not seen that congregation since, and I never will meet those people again until I meet them in another world. But I want to tell you of one lesson I learned that night,

which I have never forgotten, and that is, when I preach, to press Christ upon the people then and there, and try to bring them to a decision on the spot. I would rather have that right hand cut off than to give an audience now a week to decide what to do with Jesus. I have often been criticised; people have said:

"Moody, you seem to be trying to get people to decide all at once: why do you not give them time to consider?"

"I have asked God many times to forgive me for telling people that night to take a week to think it over, and if He spares my life, I will never do it again. This audience will break up in a few moments — we may never meet after today. There is something terribly solemn about a congregation like this.

"You will notice that Pilate was just in the condition of my audience that night, just the condition that you are in today — he had to decide then and there what to do with Jesus. The thing was sprung upon him suddenly, although I do not think that Jesus Christ could have been a stranger to Pilate. I do not believe that he had preached in Judea for months, and also in Jerusalem, without Pilate's having heard of His teachings. He must have heard of the sermons He had preached; he must have heard of the doctrine He taught; he must have heard of the wonderful parables that He uttered; he must have heard of the wonderful miracles that He had performed; he must have heard how Herod had taken the life of His forerunner by having him beheaded, and of the cruel way Herod had treated Him: Pilate was no stranger to Jesus of Nazareth.

"Ever since that night of the great fire I have determined as long as God spares my life to make more of Christ than in the past. I thank God that He is a thousand times more to me today than He was twenty-two years ago. I am not what I wish I was, but I am a good deal better than I was when Chicago was on fire."

The year 1871 was a critical one in Mr. Moody's career. He realised more and more how little he was fitted by personal acquirements for his work.

An intense hunger and thirst for spiritual power were aroused in him by two women who used to attend the meetings and sit on

the front seat. He could see by the expression on their faces that they were praying. At the close of services they would say to him: "We have been praying for you." "Why don't you pray for the people?", Mr. Moody would ask. "Because you need the power of the Spirit", they would say. "I need the power! Why", said Mr. Moody, in relating the incident years after, "I thought I had power. I had the largest congregations in Chicago, and there were many conversions. I was in a sense satisfied. But right along those two godly women kept praying for me, and their earnest talk about anointing for special service set me to thinking. I asked them to come and talk with me, and they poured out their hearts in prayer that I might receive the filling of the Holy Spirit. **There came a great hunger into my soul. I did not know what it was. I began to cry out as I never did before. I really felt that I did not want to live if I could not have this power for service.**"

While Mr. Moody was in this mental and spiritual condition Chicago was laid in ashes. Sunday night after the meeting, as Mr. Moody went homeward, he saw the glare of flames, and knew it meant ruin to Chicago. The great fire swept out of existence both Farwell Hall and the Illinois Street Church.

As soon as his wife and family were safe with friends Mr. Moody devoted himself to relief work. Before long he started for the East to raise money for the homeless, and also for the new church.

"My heart was not in the work of begging", he said. "I could not appeal. I was crying all the time that God would fill me with His Spirit. Well, one day, in the city of New York — oh, what a day! — I cannot describe it, I seldom refer to it; it is almost too sacred an experience to name. Paul had an experience of which he never spoke for fourteen years. **I can only say that God revealed Himself to me, and I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand.** I went to preaching again. The sermons were not different; I did not present any new truths, and yet hundreds were converted. I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world — it would be as the small dust of the balance." ●

Do not be afraid. Are you down? Make a struggle, and because you struggle God will struggle in you, and with you, and for you. Samson, call upon thy God. Backslider, remember, and return and repent. All is not lost. Call upon Him, and He will answer thee; because He hath set His love upon thee, He will deliver thee. "I will set him on high." "Thou shalt tread upon the lion and upon the adder; the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under foot." **What a victorious life we might live in the midst of the well-meant, destroying devilment all round about us, if we only used the power that worketh in us!**

— McNEILL.