



A Good Work in You

Philippians 1:3-6

Surprise!

A few weeks ago, I received a meme from a friend: Every family has secrets until a Sunday School teacher asks a group of kids, “Do you have any prayer requests?” Although we smile at this, we recognize the need for prayer to be the authentic sharing of deep issues that come from the heart.

Over the past two months on Sunday mornings, my congregation and I have explored some of the best-known prayers in the Bible. One of the major themes that emerged during this series was what actually takes place when we pray.

Bestselling author Tim Keller, in his excellent book entitled *Prayer*, writes, “Prayer is an encounter with the ineffable character and nature of God. It is an intimate conversation of reciprocal love, defined by a deep dependency on His provision and providence, wrapped up in adoration and thanksgiving.”

In the New Testament book of *Philippians*, the Apostle Paul pours out his heart in prayer for the people in the city of Philippi: “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” (*Philippians 1:3-6*).

Paul is encouraging and equipping his readers to live out their faith, knowing that God’s faithful hand is upon them. Paul reminds them that since God has begun to work in the deepest recesses of their souls, He will continue to do so. Paul is stimulating and stirring up their thinking, asking them to look ahead and be the people God is calling them to be. It is almost as if he is saying, “Focus on who you are becoming while He transforms you into the people He is calling you to be.”

Philippians stands out as one of Paul’s most personal epistles. No harsh words or warnings detract from its message of joy; no distressing issues are holding back the spiritual development of the congregation. Paul’s approach in writing is cautious when he raises issues, and preventive as he encourages the *Philippians* to continue developing in their faith.

Confidence (*Philippians 1:6*)

As Paul’s prayer and sense of joy increases, he writes of their “partnership in the gospel” (*Philippians 1:5*). For him this is not empty optimism as he moves his readers’ focus from the horizontal and anthropological to the vertical. His confidence, he tells us, is not in others, but in God Himself: “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” (*Philippians 1:6*).

The significance of the phrase “he who began a good work in you” is clear when you consider its meaning: God inaugurated a decisive, intentional, deliberate act on your behalf. There is nothing impulsive here, nothing abrupt or hasty. God has planned and executed this to perfection. Here is an accurate and complete picture of what happens when God calls an individual and places His transforming love upon that person.

Knowledge of God and intimacy with Him would be uncertain if it depended only on us. But God is the one who takes the initiative. “He who began a good work in you” is followed by a description of the process of sanctification, which involves God refining and changing us to become more Christ-like each day. Paul clearly reminds us that when God begins to change us and fashion our heart, mind, and soul, He will not walk away from us or abandon us in the middle of that process. Having brought us into a relationship with Himself, He will continue to change us until He completes what He started.

Here we see where Paul’s confidence lies. Not in his own ability to live the Christian life. Not in his own faithfulness, although that plays a part. His confidence lies supremely in the faithfulness of God. It is in God that he trusts—not in himself, not in his own ability or giftedness—but in God.

His confidence lies in a loving, faithful, gracious, persistent Father who loves him. Such a God nourishes within him a deep, abiding, relational connectedness that lasts throughout eternity.

But?

Yet the questions I am most frequently asked about prayer are usually couched in these terms: “What do I do when I don’t feel like praying? What do I do on the days when I can’t be bothered? What do I do when my heart is not in the right place and the last thing I want to do is pray?”

Well, may I suggest the following? What if your best prayers are the ones you quietly utter when you don’t want to pray—prayers not fueled by positive feelings toward God, but heartfelt, genuine prayers whispered with resolve and perseverance, actively attempting to overcome distraction and resistance within?

What if your best prayers take place during those moments when sheer willpower and perseverance carry you through? Prayers that come from deep within, deeper than your feelings. Prayers said in faith amidst frustration, hurt, and disappointment. Prayers that reflect who you really are when you have reached rock bottom.

Your best prayers warm your heart, cultivate and nourish your soul, and remind you that you have a personal audience with God. These prayers move you to be caught up in profound intimacy, moved by His majesty, holiness, and grace. These prayers free you from earthly cares, circumstances, and affections, to be submissive to His care, surrendering to His rule and reign. Your best prayers remind you that “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.”

Grasping the truth that God will not give up on you or walk away from you, even when you have given Him many opportunities, is truly a prayerful experience at an entirely new level. And it is one you can enjoy every day!

Watch Dr. Gibbons’ messages online at
FirstPresGreenville.org (click the Media tab)
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