

Praying Like Paul

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Ephesians 1:15-23, Colossians 1:9-12, 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

There is an elder in a church whose family is struggling. His wife is battling cancer, his daughter is wandering from the faith, and his father has recently been diagnosed with dementia. Learning of the challenges he is facing, a homebound member at the church, begins not only to pray for him and his family, but she also let him know she is doing it; a note in the mail, an occasional phone call, final greetings as he and her deacon leave her home one night. "You know that I'm praying for you," she reminds him.

A similar story is told about a parishioner whose preferred mode of communication is email. Early in the week he lets the minister know that he's praying for him as he prepares the sermon. A similar message is received the day of the funeral: "Father, give to your servant, all that he needs to bring comfort to the grieving and glory to you as he conducts the funeral today. Thank you for him and how you use him for your glory and our joy."

You probably know the term that is often used to describe such people: prayer warriors. We find them not only in our world but in the Bible as well. Think of Hannah, for example, who prays so fervently in the Lord's house that the priest thinks that she is drunk. Then there's Daniel. He faithfully prays some mighty big prayers, despite the king's decree that tells him not to. And we have Jesus, of course, who often heads off by himself to pray and who gives the disciples (and us) a model of how to pray.

Tonight, however, we turn our attention to a prayer warrior known as the Apostle Paul, who has no shortage of things to say in his letters when it comes to prayer. At times God leads him to give instructions on prayer (like we read earlier in the service from Philippians 4). Other times he asks his brothers and sisters in Christ to pray for him: that he would be able to see them again, that he would be given the words to speak, and that the doors would be open for the spread of the gospel.

But most of his writings on prayer are actually his prayers; the words that the Holy Spirit led him to pray for others. In fact, some estimate that there are over 40 of Paul's prayers of various lengths recorded in scripture, and for many of the prayers, he prayed them not just once, but he prayed them repeatedly for these people that God laid on his heart.

Ephesians 1:15-23. Let's begin by asking the question, "For whom is Paul praying?" The obvious answer is the Ephesians, of course. But who were they? The church at Ephesus was established by Paul on his homeward journey from Jerusalem, but that was not his only connection with them. He returned there a year later on his third missionary trip and stayed there for three years, preaching and teaching. This is also the church where he sent Timothy to serve as the leader.

Paul was very familiar with the Ephesian church, so he knew they were not struggling necessarily with any heresy or specific problem, as was true for some of the other churches to whom he wrote. That's probably why this letter is such a letter of encouragement to the church and why Paul begins this prayer the way he does. "...ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere, I have not stopped thanking God for you" (verses 15-16).

This is quite the compliment for the believers in Ephesus and certainly a reason to give thanks to God. They have a strong faith in the Lord, and they love all God's people. Impressive, is it not? They seem to be living out what Jesus said when he was asked about the greatest commandment. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). When it comes to their life of faith and their relationship with others, the Ephesians seem to have arrived. Mission accomplished, we might say.

But that is not where Paul ends this prayer, for in verse 17 God leads him to shift from prayers of thanksgiving to prayers of petition. He says, "May God give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you will grow in your knowledge of him, may he flood your hearts with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given you -- his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance, and may you understand the incredible greatness of God's power for all of us who believe in him."

These believers in Ephesus may be strong in their faith, but that's not enough, says Paul. He prays that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would empower them to grow deeper in their walk with God, that they would know Jesus Christ better, and that they would be filled to overflowing with his hope and his power. This is the very same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand when he ascended into heaven. Brothers and sisters in Ephesus, Paul prays, may you know that same power in your own lives as you walk with the Lord.

Brothers and sisters gathered here at LaGrave (or wherever you may be watching from tonight), let that be the prayer for us as well, for often it is much too easy to settle into a mediocre, lukewarm faith. We know Christ as Savior. We serve him at times. We may even love our neighbors as best we know how, and yet his power seems lacking in our lives.

As Paul prayed for the Ephesians, may we pray both for ourselves and for our fellow believers in Christ...that we would be filled with the power of the risen and ascended Lord, that we would be striving to know Jesus better as we dig into the Word, and that we would be growing deeper in our walk with God as we commune with him in prayer.

Colossians 1:9-14. How to know God's will for your life; that is a topic that has been discussed for years, perhaps even as far back as the early church. Books have been written about it, seminars have been held about it, and if you go online today and do a quick search, you will find many sites that offer advice on the topic: six easy steps on finding God's will, five simple ways to discern God's will, eight straightforward steps for knowing God's will for your life. There is certainly no shortage of advice on the topic.

To be honest, most of us do want to make decisions that are in line with God's will, as we should, but it's not always as easy as simple steps, whether they be five, six, eight, or some other number.

Author, Jonathan Graf, in his book on Paul's prayers, says that he's come to realize over the years that there seems to be a connection between spending time with God, gaining a knowledge of him, who he is, and what he's about, and having confidence in discerning God's will. I think the Apostle Paul would agree with him.

Paul begins verse 9 of our text by saying "For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we (him and Timothy) have not stopped praying for you." To what reason is he referring? When we look back at verse 5, we see that he's referring to the hope that the Christians in Colossae possessed because of the gospel they had received. And the more they gained an understanding of the hope they had in God, the stronger the desire to follow his will for their lives.

Listen again to how he and Timothy were praying for them: We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better.

Think about Paul's purpose in praying for the knowledge of God's will: he wanted the Colossian believers to have the strength to live a life that both pleases God and that shows joy, patience, kindness, and goodness to those around them. He wanted them to live as kingdom Christians, and as they did, they would grasp a greater sense of who God is and the way he is working in their lives.

Do you see how things come full circle with this? One commentator put it this way: to receive the gospel is to come to know God. If we know God, we should desire to do his will. If we are doing his will and his kingdom work, we will come to know God more and more.

Although discerning God's will in our day-to-day decisions is important, perhaps more important is to discern his will for day-to-day kingdom living, so that all we do honors and glorifies him. May that be the prayer for the church, a prayer that we should never stop praying.

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12. The story is told of Angie, a young woman who suffers from a chronic debilitating illness that doctors can't seem to figure out. She was a star athlete in high school, but then started getting more tired and worn out. Now, fifteen years later, she is a young mother struggling to have the energy to take care of her family.

One of her fellow small group members writes, "I have never heard a disparaging word from Angie – quite the opposite. I asked her one time if she struggled with the fact that God wasn't healing her. Her answer blessed me," he writes. "She said she would not change anything about her situation. The days she could barely get out of bed were in many ways the sweetest, for God met her there with his presence and with his grace."

Perhaps you, too, have known people who had to endure significant hardship but did it with incredible grace and faith. The believers in Thessalonica were people like this. They were people who were struggling because of persecution, but they were commended by Paul for how they were living out their faith in the midst of these hardships. In the first ten verses of this book, he wrote that their faith was a model for others to follow. Then he told them, in the verses we just read, of how he lifted them up to God in prayer.

"So we keep on praying for you," the Spirit leads Paul to pray, "asking God to empower you to live a life worthy of his call, and may he give you all you need to accomplish all the good things your faith prompts you to do. Then," Paul continues, "the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way you live, and you will be honored along with him. This is all made possible because of the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ."

Notice in that prayer that Paul does not pray for the hardship to cease. Instead, he prays that God would enable the Thessalonians to be found faithful, and that God would give success to every act of faith they attempted. Why did he pray those things? So that the name of Jesus Christ would be glorified. Paul knew that ultimately God would receive more honor, fame, and glory from his people remaining faithful in the midst of hardship than by removing the hardship.

It is, however, a hard thing to watch someone going through tough times. We all know such people. Our hearts hurt for them, and we want to cry out, "Lord, enough. Make it stop!" and yet from the lesson we learn in this passage, we should also pray for God's grace to be upon them and for Christ to be glorified in the midst of the hardship.

When we consider Paul's recorded prayers, nowhere does he pray for hardships to cease nor for physical needs to be met. I'm sure he did pray for those things in his unrecorded prayers; for in Ephesians 6:18 he calls us to pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests, but in the prayers God chose to record in scripture, Paul prayed for spiritual growth in people's lives, which to be honest, is not a natural way for most of us to pray.

However, by the power of God's Holy Spirit, we, too, can pray like Paul as we pray for people to grow in wisdom and understanding of who God is and what he can do, as we pray for people to grow stronger in their faith and in their love for each other, and as we pray for people to know and to experience more and more the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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