

## 17 The Church - Prayer

### The Power of Prayer

While Michelle and I were engaged, and coming from families that did not have a lot of money, we knew that we would have to pay for our wedding on our own. I had just bought a home and Michelle was renting an apartment at the time. So we began to pray to God that he would help provide for our wedding. Soon thereafter my sister and her husband asked Michelle if she wanted to live with them in order to save money for the wedding. Do you know what we said? We said, "Oh that's so sweet but you don't have to do that. That's ok." Then we got on our knees again and started praying, "God please provide." About that time God went out to his celestial woodshed and got a long plank of wood. He wrote on this plank the words "I am providing" and then he beat me with it. How could I have been so blind to such a clear answer to prayer?

History is filled with such examples (and far more significant examples) of the power of prayer. The Exodus was the result of the people of God crying out to him in their pain. He heard their cries and he came down to deliver them. Many births are the result of women crying out to God for a child. Every one of the Judges of Israel were the result of the people of God crying out to God for deliverance. The miracles of Christ were the result of his prayers. Miracle after miracle has been accomplished through prayer.

Let me take a moment here to make clear where the power of prayer comes from. The power of prayer is the power of God. Prayer is not some magical substance that we tap into. Prayer has no power on its own. Prayer is only powerful because of the God behind the prayer. This is why we see passages like:

Jer 21:13 You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

John 14:13 Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

John 15:7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

John 16:24 Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full

James 4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

James 5:16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

1 John 3:22 and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

1 John 5:14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

We cannot pray selfishly. We cannot presume to use prayer as a tool for our own self-advancement. We must pray according to God's will.

## The Pattern of Prayer in Scripture

Have you ever noticed what prayers look like in scripture? There are prayers of women that they may have children. There are prayers for deliverance from some danger. There are prayers for blessings and prayers for cursing. But while there are prayers for many different things, there are some prayers that are more frequent than others.

I looked at the New Testament and I began to work my way back from the book of Revelation. I stopped after I had three pages of passages on prayer. This is not an exhaustive study, but it is a representative sample. Regarding the requests that were made, I found that there was:

- 1 explicit request for salvation (Rom 10:1)
- 1 exhortation to pray for interpretation (1 Cor 14:13)
- 2 prayers for physical healing (1 John 5:16; James 5:16)
- 7 prayers for God to change circumstances (Rom 1:10; 2 Cor 1:10-11; Phil 1:19; Philemon 1:22; Hebrews 13:18-19). Especially:
  - Col 4:3-4 At the same time, pray also for us, that God **may open to us a door** for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— 4 that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.
  - 1 Thess 3:10 we pray most earnestly night and day that we **may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith**
- 13 prayers for spiritual life (3 John 1:2; 2 Cor 13:7, 9; Eph 6:17-20; Phil 1:9; Col 4:12; 2 Thess 1:11; 2 Thess 3:1; Philemon 1:4-6; 1 John 5:16; James 5:16) especially:
  - Eph 1:16-18 I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, **may give you a spirit of wisdom** and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,
  - Eph 3:14-19 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he **may grant you to be strengthened** with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
  - Col 1:9-10 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you **may be filled with the knowledge of his will** in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

The prayers for our spiritual well-being and vitality outnumber all the other requests combined. That is fascinating to me. What's more, if you look more closely at the other passages, many of them turn out to be about the very same thing. It should be obvious that praying for someone to be saved is also praying for their spiritual life and vitality. The exhortation to pray for

interpretation is so that other people would be edified; so again this is fundamentally a prayer for the spiritual well being of people.

Many of the prayers for a change of circumstances is for the purpose of ministering to other people. When Paul prays to be released from prison (a request for change in circumstances) it is not just so he can get out of prison. Paul wants to get out in order to supply what is lacking in their faith. He wants to minister and bless people and prison is in the way of that. He asks for a door to be opened. For what? for marriage? For a job? No. Paul is praying that a door will be opened to share the gospel. Again, prison is in the way. He doesn't want to get out of prison for his own sake, but for the sake of others. If Paul was only in it for himself he would not have been in prison at all. All he had to do was be quiet. But his incessant preaching of the gospel landed him in prison.

There is a rule of interpretation that says we should give the same emphasis to a doctrine as scripture gives to it. That is a fantastic rule of thumb. It has proven to be remarkably helpful many times. In this case, I think this rule is pointing out an imbalance in the way many of us pray. It is certainly not wrong to pray for physical healing. Nor is it wrong to pray for a change in your circumstances. We are encouraged to do both of these things in scripture. So my point is not that we should stop those things.

My point is this "Where are all the prayers for our spiritual vitality?" Where are the prayers that it may go well with your soul, or that we may do what is right or that our love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment? Where are the prayers that we may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God or that God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith? Where are those prayers? Where are all the prayers that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored or that we may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ?

Even in the prayers for our circumstances, do these prayers reflect a heart that seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness? When we pray for a door to be opened is it for our selfish reasons or is it for the gospel? When we pray for release is it so that we can be comfortable or so that we can minister? When we pray for healing is it so we can lead a pain free life or is it so that we can have the energy to better serve our great God and his people? Our prayers, I am afraid, could use an overhaul.

## **The Practice of Prayer**

Develop the discipline of prayer. We can preach about prayer and encourage prayer. We can read books about prayer and praise the power of prayer. We can do all these things and more and never pray. We need to develop the discipline of prayer. Give to God your best time. Let's start there. Are you a morning person? Then give the morning to God in prayer. Are you a night owl, then give the night to God in prayer. Yes, you should pray without ceasing. That is what we need to strive for. And a good first step in that direction is just to develop the discipline to give some good time to God once a day.

Pray out loud. It used to be that almost all prayers were done out loud. Have you ever noticed how hard it is to concentrate when you are praying? Has your mind ever wandered during prayer?

Praying out loud is a good way to stay focused.

Pray authentically. This means a couple things. First, don't pray in meaningless repetition. When

we find that at every meal we say, "Thank you for this day, thank you for this food. Amen." we are probably guilty of inauthentic prayer. Second, don't pray with wonderfully eloquent words. That may be a sign that you are merely trying to impress other people or that you simply enjoy hearing your own words. It may be that those eloquent words express well what is in your heart. If so, fine. But often they reveal that your prayers are meant more as a show and less as authentic communication with God. Don't try to pull the wool over God's eyes - it won't work. Just be real in your prayers.

Adore - Worship God for who he is

Confess - Be specific. Recognize your sins and name them

Thanksgiving - Give thanks to God for the thousands of things that he has done for you.

Supplication - Finally ask God for the things on your heart.

## Public Prayer

I want to close on this point since this is part of a series on the church. Public prayer needs to be corporate prayer. When one person gets up here and prays out loud for all the congregation to hear, there can be one of two things happening. Either this is one arrogant person who is presuming that his prayers are the best and that for some reason everyone else should listen to the words that he has to say to God. Or, he is humbly speaking as a representative of the church. So that when he prays, all of us pray through him.

This is why we say amen at the end of prayers. Amen means "true." When we say amen we are saying, "yes! I agree!" "You have spoken truly and we are united in mind on this." With that in mind, isn't it kind of odd to say amen if you are praying alone? You are saying "Yes, I agree with me." Well I should hope so. If you don't agree with yourself you may be in some need of counseling. "Amen" only makes sense if you are praying in a group.

So when someone gets up to pray, we are not passive pew-sitters eaves dropping on someone else's prayer. Rather we are active encouragers of and supporters in the prayer. It is like when David went out to fight Goliath. Although David is the one who did the fighting, the rest of Israel was not passive observers. David represented them. He fought for them. If he died they would be subject to the Philistines. The whole nation was on pins and needles as David, their champion, fought against this giant Philistine.

I think our stance in public prayer should more closely resemble that attitude. That person is praying and we are praying with him. He speaks and represents us. He fights on that secret battleground on our behalf, and our hearts are with him. We are the church. We are one people joined in a covenant bond in Jesus. We are a family. Our public prayers need to be corporate, collective, prayers.