

PRAYING LIKE THE APOSTLE PAUL

by, Jonathan Graf

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Jonathan Graf

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The Apostle Paul gives an interesting picture of prayer in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11. He talks to the Corinthian believers about all the hardships he has been through on the missionary trip which he and his team have taken. He says: *"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us."* The team had sensed that death could come to them at any moment. But then he goes on to say: *"On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many."*

Here Paul was not talking about prayer in a casual way, not simply stating that when he was on this missionary journey he knew that some people were back home praying and that gave him comfort. No! He believed that there was a battle going on in the heavenlies which required a different kind of praying, prayer like that spoken of in Matthew 11:12: *"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it."* The way *"forceful men lay hold"* of the kingdom, overcoming the gates of hell, is through prayer. Paul believed that as they were on this journey, forceful men among the Corinthian believers were laying hold of the battle through prayer and that prayer had a profound impact on what was literally happening! Paul, when encouraging people to join in prayer, writes in Romans 15:30: *"I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me."*

Paul uses another image in Colossians 4:12. Here he was talking about a friend whom the Colossians knew, Epaphras: *"Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured."* If we were wanting people to pray for us, how many of us would use the terminology that Paul used: *"...join me in my struggle," "...wrestling in prayer."* Wrestling is hard work. The Apostle Paul prayed differently than most of us pray in church prayer meetings.

The way most believers are praying is what I call, "little answerables." Most of us are praying for the everyday "fix it" needs of our life. Life is going along all right. Something happens to upset it, and we want to pray that away and get back to normal. As Western believers, many of us have this sense of entitlement that for the believer life should be good. Much of the prayer efforts of a given church, and of my own life as well, are probably the majority of the time those "fix it" kinds of things. "Get this turned around," "change this so they can be free of that pain and of that illness, or so this financial need can be taken care of." I call these horizontal prayers instead of upward focused prayers.

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Most of the time prayers offered for such situations are made out of duty for the one who requested prayer. Because we want to show love for them we pray as they request. We pray the obvious – not thinking about what God wants to do through this situation. Nothing is wrong with people asking for these needs, and nothing is wrong with people praying for them. It is a way to show love to the body. But most of the time we don't pray about the bigger kingdom things. We need to focus a greater portion of our prayer meeting times on broader things, on more kingdom kind of things.

Kingdom Praying

How can we move our prayers to become more kingdom focused? What is a kingdom prayer? I think it is two-fold:

1. A kingdom prayer is something that has lasting value and importance in the kingdom of God. We can be praying for someone's salvation, for example. We can be praying for a certain country to open for the Gospel.

2. We can also pray kingdom prayers in "little answerable" situations. We are praying a kingdom prayer when we know what we are praying in that situation is God's will. In Romans 8:26-27 we have the Holy Spirit's role in prayer. It says that when we don't know what to pray for, *"the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."* Sometimes I am so focused on what I want to see God doing that I miss what God is actually doing. Through His intercession the Holy Spirit helps me to pray according to the will of God.

Model Prayers of Paul

To help us focus more on kingdom things, let us look at some of Paul's prayers. They can be a model for us. Paul had a lot of people under his care with needs. He had started churches throughout Asia Minor and people were being persecuted, etc., and so he had many people with needs, but look at Paul's prayers. There are twenty-one places in Scripture where Paul is asking God to do something, but in all of the prayers of Paul, I do not see any place where Paul prayed for an answer to a specific need for a specific person. I would be surprised if Paul never prayed for answers to specific personal needs, but we do not see that in Scripture. When Paul lived it would be difficult to keep up with praying specific needs for specific people because communication was not what it is today. It could take a month or more to get a word from a church a distance away and to know what is happening in someone's life.

What Paul's recorded prayers do say to me is not that I should not pray for specific answers to specific needs, but if Paul spent the bulk of his time praying in another vein, maybe I need to think about praying a good portion of my prayers in that same vein.

In Second Corinthians 12 Paul did pray something very specific for himself. He prayed that the "thorn" in his flesh would be removed. We do not know what it was, but Paul felt it was something that was hindering his ministry, keeping him from being as effective as he could be, and so he says in this passage that he asked God to remove that. What did God say? He

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said, *"My grace is sufficient for you"* (v. 9). God helped Paul to know that He would get greater glory by that being in Paul's life and God giving him the enablement to overcome it and to operate with it. So Paul stopped praying about that.

Many believers observe "The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church." Do we not usually pray some kind of a prayer about getting the persecuted out of their trouble, as Paul first prayed about his "thorn"? I am not for Christians being persecuted, but I know historically that wherever the Church was persecuted, it thrived. In The Christian and Missionary Alliance Church that I grew up in, their largest mission field in 1975 was Vietnam. In it was the largest national Church they had outside the U.S., probably 70,000 to 80,000 believers and hundreds of churches. In 1975 Vietnam fell to the Communists and missionaries had to leave, pastors were persecuted and many of them were thrown into prison for years. Now that the country is opening up again and Westerners are getting back in, they are analyzing where our churches are. They were thirty years without any missionaries or outside help whatsoever, and the Church today is around a million believers. Why the increase? It has something to do with persecution.

Oftentimes we want to pray people out of things and God wants to use things in people's lives to grow them to be more kingdom-minded, to cause people to be drawn to things of the kingdom. That is what Paul had in mind.

For What Did Paul Pray?

In Romans 15:5-6, Paul prays: *"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."* In Romans 15:13, Paul prays: *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."*

Even though the Church in Rome was probably starting to experience persecution and these believers were trying to just survive in a city hostile to Christianity, Paul doesn't pray for safety or protection for them. That is the first thing most of us would think to pray for. Instead, Paul prays for unity in the first prayer and for joy and peace in the second prayer. Why? Both verses contain the words, *"so that."* Nineteen of Paul's prayers contain those words. In other words Paul prays, "I pray this 'so that' this will happen." In these two verses, the unity of believers which he prays for would bring glory to God. Jesus prayed for unity of believers in John 17. Jesus prayed *"that all of them may be one, Father...so that the world may believe that You have sent Me"* (v. 21). Jesus also said in John 12:32: *"I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself."*

Paul knew that when outsiders saw the unity of the Church they would be drawn to Jesus Christ in great numbers. Therefore, rather than pray for the obvious, for protection, he prayed with kingdom eyes: something like "Give them unity so that people would be attracted to the Gospel." When the Church is in unity, something happens in the heavenlies, and people are attracted to the Gospel.

There are many communities in Indiana where groups of pastors are praying together. In one of those communities, five to seven years ago, they started doing Concerts of Prayer

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together, perhaps quarterly or every fifth Sunday. The pastors prayed together each week. They had intercessors from churches gather one Tuesday night a month to pray for their community. There was a lot of unity. Three or four years ago the mayor noticed this. He was not a believer, but he came to the pastors' group and said, "I understand your intercessors pray each month for the community. If I gave you prayer requests that were around the vision we have for this city, would they pray for that?" "Sure," they responded, "we will do that." So every month the mayor's office sends a list of needs. There is something about unity that causes people to be drawn to the Gospel.

In the second verse, Romans 15:13, Paul prays for joy and peace amid the turmoil of their lives so that they would overflow with hope. People who have hope in tough times are very attractive to those who don't have hope. Some have watched a believer go through a very difficult situation, maybe a health need or a difficult family situation, and see they do it with a sense of trust that was evident or a sense of peace, even a sense of joy. Unbelievers wonder at that. "How can they do it?" they think. "I couldn't do it like that." That gives the believer a chance to share Christ. God uses those things in people's lives.

We want to pray people out of things and God may want to use those things to grow His kingdom and to attract people to the Gospel. Paul knew that, so rather than pray people out of these difficult situations, he prayed that they would have peace and joy and hope in the midst of them, so people would be attracted to the Gospel.

Paul's Prayer for the Ephesians

Ephesus was the center of the worship of Artemis or Diana. At one time when he was there, some of his companions were attacked by a mob. Paul knows the stress and pressure the church is under. But instead of praying the obvious for them, protection for them, he prays for spiritual development and fruit in them. In Ephesians 1:15-19 we read:

"For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and His incomparably great power for us who believe."

A little later in Ephesians 3:16-19 Paul prays: *"...that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."*

That's a kingdom prayer! That is seeking that whatever a person is going through, whatever is happening in his or her life, that it would serve to bring them deeper into a relationship with Christ. Paul was always praying for things that would develop godly character, Christ-likeness, wisdom, discernment and such things. I am in many church prayer meetings,

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and I cannot recall any time hearing one believer praying for the spiritual development of another believer.

Paul's Prayer for the Philippians

Look at Philippians 1:9-11: *"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God."*

In virtually all of Paul's prayers he seems to pray more for the process than the results. He does have an idea of what he wants the results to be. In most of his prayers he has a "so that" which is what he wants to happen. The results that Paul wants to see in the Philippians' lives is he wants them to be discerning of what is best, and he wants them to live pure and blameless lives. But what does he pray? He prayed that their love would abound more and more in knowledge and in depth of insight. He prayed that they would become more loving toward each other, that they would have knowledge of Christ's love for them, etc. What is the connection between the results and what he prayed for?

What would happen in your church if all of a sudden one day a grace of love came over your congregation so that everybody started loving one another more, everybody began understanding Christ's love for them much more than they now did? What would happen to the petty little annoyances and offences that tend to keep churches bogged down? We wouldn't get offended. We wouldn't attack one another. Things would get done in a board meeting much quicker. We may sacrifice our opinion and accept that of others about a decision being made. If that happened in a church, do you think we would live more blameless lives? We'd start to be discerning and doing what's best. That is what Paul wanted to happen so he prays for love.

Paul's Prayer for Philemon

Go to the book of Philemon. Philemon was probably a Christian businessman and had a house church in his home. Paul had come into contact with a man named Onesimus who was one of Philemon's slaves who had run away. Onesimus had come to Christ and wanted to return to Philemon and make things right so Paul sent a letter urging Philemon to take him back into fellowship. Paul writes to Philemon: *"I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ"* (v. 6). When we say, *"...share your faith..."* we think of sharing with an unbeliever but Paul is probably referring to the body of believers, sharing with them what Christ is doing in your life.

In Philemon, what Paul wants to happen for Philemon is that he would have a full understanding of everything he had in Christ. What he prays for is that Philemon would be active in sharing his faith. What is the connection between someone sharing his faith and his having a full understanding of all he has in Christ? If someone is constantly sharing what Christ is doing in his life and giving glory to God for that, do you think God would give him things to share? God would give plentifully to one like that, and he would be learning about God's love,

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and about His being a provider, His trustworthiness and His faithfulness, etc. That person would be sharing them and getting a deeper understanding of who He is.

Before and after church we are standing around chatting about our week. Seldom do we talk about spiritual things. If in those times, everybody would make it a practice of every week sharing one thing with one person that Jesus Christ did for them in their life that week, or something fresh and new that they have learned about Him perhaps in their devotional time – if everybody was sharing what Christ was doing, even those who weren't used to seeing such things would get their eyes opened. They would start to look for such things. Instead of taking things as coincidences, they would realize this was something God was doing for them and they would share it. It would be an exciting place to be. God would be getting glory. That is what Paul is praying for here for Philemon. Get active in sharing your faith, because if you do that, you're going to get a greater understanding of who Christ is in you.

Some Applications

We have looked at how Paul prayed, but how does that apply to us? Take someone who perhaps has a sore foot. I come from a group that believes in divine healing and in laying on of hands and praying for the sick. If I don't know anything else from the Lord that He wants to do, that is what I will do. But I also know God doesn't always heal instantly. He may want to do things in people's lives. Maybe the afflicted believer has a neighbor who isn't a believer and when the latter hears that the one with the sore foot will need surgery and will be laid up for a while, she takes her some meals or runs errands for her. Thus the neighbor comes in touch with the believer more than she ordinarily does. So the believer is able to share Christ with her. Maybe that is what God wants to do.

Think of a student struggling with a class. She wants to be a doctor. Her father is a doctor. She wants to follow in his footsteps no matter what. But maybe God has something else in mind for her. She may not turn God's way until she struggles with her own choice.

How about a neighbor with whom there is a boundary dispute? The neighbor wants to put in a fence with the posts on the property of the believer. Maybe God wants to do something in the heart of the neighbor because of the way the believer responds in that situation. So we approach prayer needs carefully and ask, "What does God want to do?" Do not just pray the first obvious thing – "Fix it." Ask, "What does God want to do to grow His kingdom in and through this?"

Three Principles

There are three principles you can follow when you have a need to pray for.

1. The first is, don't immediately jump to the obvious when you pray for a need. Instead, start by seeking God as to what He wants you to pray. What is it He wants to do in the situation? What might His will be? Is there something you sense God wants to do? What's the "so that"? What would give glory to God in this situation? Begin to pray that.

I firmly believe that if we get into a mode where we will seek God for what we should pray in a situation and pause and listen, that many times God will give us that. Even when we

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are dealing with somebody on the spot, we can get in a mode where we listen and breathe a prayer – "Holy Spirit, what do You want me to pray about this?"

2. The second principle is, don't be so quick to pray the result. Pray the process. Pray for spiritual development and fruit in the life of the one with the need. Ask God, "What characteristics, what things are You wanting to grow in this family? What do You want to do to bring glory to Yourself in this situation?"

3. The third thing is, what do you do when you don't know what to pray? You've asked God and you aren't getting anything. Pray Scripture. What's a promise from Scripture you can grab ahold of and pray for that person? Is there a verse that God quickens in your heart to pray for that person? Like Paul, think about what we can be praying of a spiritual development nature for people in and through these things. Seek God, asking, "What is it You want me to pray?"

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