

Introduction

I came close this week to a complete catastrophe. It was around 5:30 in the evening. So it was dark. Melissa and I had just left our house and were casually traveling down a neighborhood street on our way to dinner. As usual at that time of the evening, almost no one in the neighborhood was out, or so it seemed. All of a sudden, however, the figure of a human being in a coat came into view directly in front of our car. I slammed on brakes and swerved away from the figure. And somehow, to the praise of the grace of God, we did not hit the person. I collected myself and we proceeded on our way. I just kept thinking how close we came to experiencing an event that would have utterly and completely changed not only our evening plans but for that matter the totality of our lives not to mention the life of the other person. You just come to take for granted that you will get in the car and proceed merrily down the street of your neighborhood without incident. In the aftermath, I resolved to renew my watchfulness as I drive through my neighborhood in the dark.

It is easy to lose sight of the significance of some of the most basic matters because they are so routine. Often we begin to take them for granted and underestimate their importance. To take them for granted, however, is to expose ourselves to potential catastrophe. So as we start another new year, I thought it appropriate to focus on one of the most basic and important matters in the life of a follower of Christ lest it be overlooked or become routine. Paul addresses the issue in Ephesians 6:18. But I would like to read the whole of the context for our scripture reading this morning. So, let's begin with Ephesians 6:10 and read through verse 20. Our focus this morning however, will be on verse 18.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

So Paul is urging believers to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Believers are in a spiritual battle with the devil and his allies whose goal is to make us fall. We need to be prepared for battle by arming ourselves properly. Having properly outfitted ourselves, Paul focuses on one primary and ongoing action—the action of praying. Prayer is imperative for the goal of withstanding the forces of darkness in the evil day. But prayer is about more than just withstanding evil forces. And there is more to prayer than what we often think. So let's turn our attention to what Paul says here in Ephesians 6:18. Paul's main idea is that the saints of God must pray. But what is prayer? When ought we to pray? How ought we to go about prayer? And what are the different elements of prayer? In this exhortation to pray, Paul answers these questions. Those answers will help lead us toward renewing our devotion to prayer. And it is a good thing to do as we stand right on the threshold of a new year.

First then, let's put our attention on . . .

I. The Significance of Prayer.

That we should pray is unmistakable as we look at the Bible as a whole. As far back as Genesis 4, we are told that people began to call upon the name of the Lord. It is only fitting that creatures made in the image of God call upon the name of him who created them. It is characteristic of Abraham that he would build an altar and call upon the name of the Lord. Moses spent multitudes of hours in prayer and communion with the Lord. Samuel was known as an intercessor. The prayers of David fill the pages of the psalms. Of course we learn that the life of the God/man, Jesus himself, was marked by prayer. Moving forward into the early church, we note that among the four basic commitments to which they were devoted, there was prayer. When the Lord sent Ananias to go to

Paul who had just been converted, the Lord said to him, "Look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold he is praying."

The pages of the New Testament are filled with exhortations for God's people to pray. Here is a cluster of such texts. In Matthew 26:41, Mark 14:38, and Luke 22:40, Jesus instructs his disciples to "watch and pray." In Romans 12:12 Paul delivers the imperative to Christians to "be constant in prayer." Philippians 4:6-7 is where Paul writes, "be anxious for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication let your request be made known to God." Recorded in Colossians 4:2, Paul tells the saints, "Continue steadfastly in prayer." Paul instructed the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing." To Timothy he wrote that "men should pray." The writer of Hebrews urges believers to draw near to God's throne of grace to receive grace and find mercy. James strongly exhorts his readers to pray. And Jude 20 like Ephesians 6:18 says that believers should be "praying in the Spirit." It is unmistakable that Christians should be a people who pray.

The significance of prayer is also strongly suggested by the context of Paul's exhortation here in Ephesians 6. Having done all to stand, and having put on all the armor of God, Christians are to pray so that they may continue to stand and to withstand the assaults of the evil day. They could put on all the armor, but it would be of little import unless the Christian soldier prays. The significance of prayer is incapable of being overly stressed in our own thinking. And we need to be reminded of its importance. If nothing else, the sheer number of times this command is repeated should get our attention. It should tell us to be on guard against ever growing laxness in prayer. It should tell us to be on guard against becoming too accustomed to prayer, taking it for granted.

And we need to stress another aspect of the significance of prayer. And this comes down to the word PRAYER itself. It speaks of conversation and communion between human beings and God. To pray is to call upon the name of the Lord. It is when the finite creature speaks and addresses the infinite Creator. It is when the insufficient and dependent human converses with the self-sufficient and self-existent God. The reality is captured in Psalm 8 by David. He is overwhelmed that he might call upon the Lord. He writes, "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. You have set your glory above the heavens. . . . When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the Son of Man that you care for him? . . . O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

We take little thought of talking with one another. If we need something, we will talk to another human. If we want to say something, we will not hesitate to tell another person. But the significance of prayer is that it is an audience with God. If you have a need, here is the one who can meet it. If you can't explain how you feel, here is the one who certainly understands. Prayer is a great privilege. God does hear the prayers of people, but he is not bound to do so. And particularly as sinners, we have no right to consider ourselves entitled to pray to the holy and great God of the universe.

A powerful image of the privilege is depicted for us in the book of Esther. The king was so highly exalted that it was unlawful for someone to approach. A person took his life in his hands if he were to seek an audience with the king. But in an effort to help her fellow Jews, Esther, the queen took her life in her hands and approached the king. He raised his scepter and welcomed her to approach. Why should we think it less significant if God raises his scepter and invites human beings to approach. He is holy, holy, holy.

The only reason a human can think himself or herself welcomed into the presence of the Lord is because the Lord has demonstrated himself to be loving. As we talked about last week, God demonstrates love, incredible love, for the world by giving his Son. When you think of Esther approaching the king, she was welcomed because she found favor in the eyes of the king. Why should a sinner find favor in the eyes of God? Hebrews helps us out. It says that in Jesus we have a high priest who has been tempted in every respect as we are and yet without sin. God raised his scepter to his perfect son. And he will raise his scepter to you and me if we will approach Him through Jesus Christ the great high priest.

It is because Jesus lived without sin and died and was raised again from the dead that a human has the unspeakable privilege of approaching the Holy God of the universe. Jesus brings reconciliation for those whose faith is in him. He brings redemption, forgiveness. He is our perfect mediator. We can only draw near through him. Yet WE CAN draw near through him to the God of all things. Do not miss the significance of prayer. Do not miss that he receives those who draw near but only who draw near through Christ. These are his children.

And that fact points us to another item of incredible significance concerning prayer. When Christians pray, we speak with the Infinite and Eternal God who alone is immortal, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see, to whom belongs honor and eternal dominion. But this one and only one truly magnificent God through Christ is related to us as our FATHER. Jesus's instructions about prayer and how to pray begin with this point. He tells his disciples to "Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven." Here is another astounding point about prayer. We pray to him who is our Father. We speak with one who loves his children, cares for his children, who sacrificed his one and only true Son so that we might also be his sons and daughters. It should be plain in this way that God's heart beats for the welfare of his children.

Something a little embarrassing happened a few weeks ago. Melissa and I had the grand kids at Chick-Fil-A. Titus loves to go to the play place there. Rebekah was enjoying herself as well. It has an enclosed climbing tube up 8 feet off the ground. The tunnel splits in two. One direction leads to a slide and the other dead ends into a plastic race car. The little space was pretty crowded that day. And all of a sudden there was this scream coming from above my head out of the race car. I dismissed it at first figuring it to be one of the girls who was climbing around overhead. Within a few seconds, however, I realized it was Titus. My heart begins to beat hard and my adrenaline begins to flow. I get up on something to peer into the race car suspended above to see what's going on. You can't see very well but I can tell that Titus is cornered by two girls in the dead-end of the race car, and he is crying. He is not being beaten up or anything but still I can't imagine why he is so upset. I begin urging him to come out and come on down and he just sits there crying. So I become rather emphatic and urgent. My voice was raised and apparently many in the restaurant observed me. But there was still no movement on Titus's part. Finally, I climb up the platform myself and into the tube and down to the car. I tell him to come to me. And at last he did. The explanation of the trouble seems to be that Titus felt trapped and the girls were laughing at him. But the point I am making is that even a grandad whose grandchild is in trouble will embarrass himself if necessary to come to the rescue of his grandchild. How much more will our heavenly Father respond to his children who cry out to him in prayer.

You and I must not fail to realize that when we pray we are talking to the great and omnipotent God who made us but also the kind and gracious God who has saved us to be his children. Such a realization should make us rush to be with him in presence through prayer. It is that significant! Next, let's consider the question, "when should we pray?" Paul spells out emphatically . . .

II. The Occasion for Prayer.

Paul's words are these: "praying at all times." Whatever time it is is an appropriate occasion for prayer. David says he will cry out to God evening and morning and at noon (Psalm 55:17). Paul tells the Thessalonians to never stop praying.

We should live in state of prayer. Certainly we should have a focused time of prayer at least once a day, but we should live praying. Why would we not? Our amazing heavenly Father is always with us and never leaves us. And prayer is our lifeline of joy, strength, hope, peace, and assurance.

So when you are tempted to be anxious, you should be praying. When you are experiencing victory, you should be praying. When you feel safe, you should be praying. When you are longing to know God better, you should be praying. When you see God working, you should be praying. When you feel like he is not at work, you should be praying. When you are happy, when you are sad, when you are obeying and when you have disobeyed, you should be praying. When you feel strong and when you feel weak, when times are good or times are tough. Every time is a time for prayer. Praying at all times.

That brings us next to . . .

III. The Practice of Prayer.

Paul answers the question, "How ought we to pray?" He says we should pray at all times . . . "in the Spirit."

This phrase, "in the Spirit," is a little tricky. Some might be led to think that praying in the Spirit is praying in a heavenly language. Others might think that there will be a particular feeling associated with praying in the Spirit. Still others might wonder how in the world any of us would ever understand what it means. Are we looking for an experience? Or is praying in the Spirit something we can by God's grace will to do?

Initially we need to understand and affirm that praying in the Spirit is an act that we can by God's grace WILL to do. Based on Paul's instruction here in Ephesians 6:18, praying in the Spirit is an act we are to carry out in contrast to not praying in the Spirit. So then HOW do we pray in the Spirit?

Prayer is a good thing, but it can be carried out in a bad way. Prayer is carried out in a bad way whenever it is not carried out in the Spirit. Now the key for understanding what it means to pray in the Spirit is to grasp that there are two opposing realities in the life of a follower of Christ. One reality is the Spirit and the other reality is the flesh. Paul says in Romans 8 that those who are in Christ Jesus live according to the Spirit, but those who are not in Christ live according to the flesh. Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit while those who live in their natural condition, that is according to the flesh, set their minds on the things of the flesh and that is the way that is hostile to God and does not submit to God. The way of the world and worldliness is to set the mind on the things of the flesh, and this is hostile to God. The way of those who are in Christ is to set the mind on the things of the Spirit. At the same time we who are in Christ are told to actively set our minds on the things that are above. We are actively to pursue setting our minds on the things of the Spirit.

There are times, of course, when Christians falter and think according to the flesh. This was the problem among the believers to whom James was writing. They were praying but not receiving because they were praying according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit. The evidence was

the things they were asking God for were fleshly in nature. They asked for what could be spent on their passions.

Jesus also pointed to the kinds of praying that are characterized by praying according to the flesh. You see, if you are praying according to the flesh, then your attention is fixed upon the quality of yourself in your praying. Things like how long are you praying or how many words are you speaking or how eloquent do you sound take the forefront of your attention. In contrast, think on what Jesus said about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others." He continued, "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words." According to the flesh, prayer is a performance designed to impress and manipulate. It is a box to be checked off hoping for a fleshly reward. This is not praying in the Spirit.

Praying in the Spirit starts with the heart not the words. A telling situation took place when Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well. She was all concerned about where was the right PLACE for worship, and Jesus told her it is not about WHERE YOU are but where YOUR HEART is. For God seeks worshipers who will worship in spirit and truth. That is, it is not an outward form but an inward devotion of the heart. Praying in the Spirit starts with a heart that is in sync with the Spirit of God. It realizes it cannot perform to the satisfaction of a Holy God. So it does not draw near to impress God. It rather draws near to experience the unfathomable grace and greatness of God. It sets itself not on its passions but on the will and ways of God. It takes the place of a child drawing near to spend time with his father. He is not looking at his watch or keeping count of his words. He is set on drinking deeply of fellowship with God.

This only happens when we pray with our minds on the things of the Spirit with the help of the Spirit. We stop trying to get from God and resign to submit to him even in our prayers. It is this attitude which desires above all that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It is this attitude which is convinced by the Spirit of adoption that we are the children of God and our Father will always give to his children exactly what we need.

We may wonder, if God is all-knowing and knows what we need, why do we need to pray? And the answer is that no, we tell God nothing that he does not already know. But in prayer we take part in the blessed experience of fellowship with God. We set our minds and hearts on the things above. We delight in God our Father and we enjoy his delight in us his children.

So prayer in the Spirit is not designed or intended to change God or to manipulate God into doing something for us he otherwise would not want to do. Rather, prayer in the Spirit is designed to bring about change in us, conformity to his likeness, and glory being given to God.

I am nearing the end of my time, but I want you to see one other important facet of prayer. And that is that it is multi-faceted. I want you to see . . .

IV. The Elements of Prayer.

Paul says we are to be "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication." Paul distinguishes between all kinds of prayer and making requests. Surely, making requests is one kind of prayer, and we are to make requests, but there are other kinds of prayer and we are to carry them out as well.

I have shared it from this pulpit before. I have also shared it personally with a number of you. It is something I learned years ago as a help for me to remember and carry out "praying with all prayer and supplication." I am speaking of the acrostic, ACTS. A-C-T-S. In this acrostic, A stands for adoration or praise. The first indispensable element of prayer is spoken worship. It is the prayer "hallowed be your name." The word of God is replete with prayers of praise to God. I mentioned Psalm 8 earlier. It is a psalm which reflects adoration. "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" Praying in the Spirit will never lack words of praise being spoken to God.

The C stands for confession. How can a sinner dare to draw near to a Holy God. Isaiah himself confessed that he was undone by his sin. "I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." David wrote two heartfelt psalms of confession and deep brokenness over his sin. On occasion we should all turn to Psalm 32 and Psalm 51. But every time we come to God we should be confessing our unworthiness and specific sins which need to be dealt with in order to continue in the sweetness of fellowship.

The letter T stands for thanksgiving. The 100th Psalm exhorts us to enter into his gates with thanksgiving. Paul tells us to make our petitions with thanksgiving. How can we have meaningful interchange with God and not tell him thanks. We should receive our everyday provisions of daily bread and breath with gratitude. We should mark our positions before him as being recipients of his goodness and as those who could not live without it. We absolutely depend upon our Father for all good things.

Finally, the letter S stands for supplications. These are the requests we should make. And the Bible itself tells us that we should pray for various concerns. We should pray for other saints. We should pray for the preachers of the word and the successful spread of the gospel. We should pray for those in positions of governing authority. We should pray for God to meet our daily needs. We should pray for growth in knowing and understanding the will of God. We should pray about anything and everything that concerns us. We should pray for our enemies. We should pray for the glory of God. We should pray for Christ's kingdom to come. We should pray for deliverance from temptation. We should pray for forgiveness.

Conclusion

God is so so good. And one of his great gifts is the privilege of prayer. In closing this morning, I just want to urge us all as we enter the year 2023 to renew our devotion to prayer. Let us determine to pray at all times, in the Spirit, with each kind of prayer. We are instructed to do so. But we are also enticed to do so because of the promise that God hears and responds to the prayers of his people, and in the context of prayer, we come to know him better and better. Let us therefore draw near that we may receive grace and find mercy to help in time of need. Such will be 2023.