

“The Prayer Closet”

July 14, 2013

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

National and District Evangelical Free Church Offices: the Lord will give them wisdom as they provide services and counsel to local churches during these days of financial leanness and governmental and social hostility; the Lord will give wisdom and strength to the new District Superintendent, Neal Brower, as he makes contact with Pastors and churches

President Obama & Governor Brown: the Spirit will open their minds to the wisdom and necessity of the rule of law rather than the opinions of men; the Lord will protect them from all evil, especially evil counselors; the Spirit will instill a heart of thanksgiving and reverence in them

Church Leadership Retreat: the Lord will guide the Saturday, July 20th meeting to unity regarding ministry objectives for the coming year, especially regarding the potential for church staffing

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: Chris Bowen, Army Boot Camp (son of Randy and Ruth): for physical stamina and to endure until the end, graduates Aug 9; that God work in his heart to help him see God’s mercy and love in his life; for Christian fellowship and instructors

Young Adult of the Week: Mary Finn, University of Southern Alabama (daughter of Sean and Penny): that she is able to find housing, roommates and a car by August; feeling discouraged and homesick, please pray for encouragement

Please pray for the health and recovery of our church family: Bob Boettcher, Carol Bernerd, Carol and Scott Koehler, Carole Lindsey, Dick & Jane Miller, Ellen McNabb, Joe Avery, Phil Peterson, Randy Bowen

(please call the office to request updates)

If you will open your scriptures at this time we will continue our study [in Paul’s letter to the Philippians]. The title is as it was last week, “Training for Greatness”. This is number 2 and the text is Philippians 1:27-2:2. Join with me in reading that section of God’s Word.

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affections and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”

Would it not be a joy indeed if that was a description of the life we lived together in Christ whether we think of our families or we think of the larger family of the church?. If in all occasions there was this lively sympathy, this positive and encouraging interaction, this readiness to stand alongside the person next to us and to take upon ourselves the burdens that they carry, so that we walk together in this harmonious continual sort of affirmation so that yes indeed by the grace of God we are one in Christ? That would be glorious indeed. And it is obvious that it is the intention of God’s Word, the intention therefore of the Holy Spirit that we would in fact strive in that direction, that we would constantly reach for that to be in fact the experience that is ours as we are together day by day.

The general theme of this whole letter, the letter that Paul wrote to the Philippians, is that we are to live the Christian life with joy; that joy is to be sort of the signature that defines and describes who we are. There is a wonderful saying in Nehemiah 8:5 that says the joy of the Lord is our strength. So the message that we get in a general sense is that as we receive the grace of God and let that grace remove from our hearts and lives the bitterness of sin and the guilt of sin, and the fear of sin, when these burdens are cast off and we sense the indwelling presence of God, a God who loves us and a God who saves us, then joy, inner joy should be the up-welling reality with which we greet all of the events [in life] and the people with whom we share them.

To love God and follow after Jesus, pursuing “The Way”, as it was often times called, however, leads to problems. Paul develops the theme of joy against the background of a Christian’s inevitable suffering. Why is it inevitable? It is inevitable because to pursue “The Way” was unavoidably to run against the grain and the will of people in the world. It is as simple as that. I have made the illustration before that when you are walking with the world you are all walking together in this direction. Normally you are all crabby and fighting and just being a real pain in the neck – that is the way we are with one another. But when we accept Christ, all of a sudden we realize, “Oh, now I am going to walk [against the flow].” Guess what happens when I walk against an on-coming crowd: they are not highly pleased! You are in the way. One of the characteristics you may have noticed in the invocation today – Psalm 112 gives a beautiful description of God’s love for the righteous and then [did you] notice how the last verse speaks? The wicked become furious at the righteous. You would think, but the righteous are such good people—precisely. Paul develops the theme of the letter that we are to live in joy against the background of the inevitable suffering [by the Christian].

Philippian 1:27-30 deal directly with the reality of that opposition that we run into in the world. Looking, therefore, at Philippians 1:27-30, what we want to do is to look particularly at verse 28. Notice that in this verse Paul says that “. . . *whether I come and see you or am absent I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.*” “*Not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.*” The Lord encourages the Philippians not be taken aback by the fact that now that they have joined themselves with Christ [and] suddenly they have opponents. You and I both know that it is not surprising that numbered amongst those opponents will be some of our good friends. All of a sudden things change and we no longer can be confident of the same set of relationships because we have changed so profoundly.

What is important is to recognize that there are always opponents. That is part of the message that comes to us through the scriptures. There are always opponents. In Paul’s day the number of opponents to the gospel was huge. In our day, as you know, that number is growing. In Paul’s day virtually every institution and power structure and institution was lined up against the gospel, including the Jewish religious establishment in Israel. You might recall the response of the Sadducees and Pharisees to Jesus Himself, and their response to Him was continued in their oppression and persecution of the church—of course! There are always opponents. In our day this is increasingly happening again. If you read the papers, if you follow the information and news on the internet you know that there is increasingly a resistance and indeed hostility towards the Christian faith being manifested by policies in our own nation. So we sense that increased reality of opposition to those who follow Christ.

There are always opponents. From our perspective what we need to recognize is that this is by the Lord’s design. Indeed, the reality of opposition is part of the mystery of God’s sovereign rule over a world that is in rebellion against Him. God has triumphed. There is no question about that. In Colossians 2:15 Paul makes this stunning statement; it is a glorious statement: “. . . *[Jesus] has disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame. . .*” So when Jesus Christ is on the cross, He dies, He goes into the grave and then He rises up again from the dead, that triumph of life over death is the denial of all those [powers] that stood against the grace of God and intended that death would be triumphant. Jesus says life is triumphant. Who is the God of life? It is indeed our Living Father.

So the triumph of Jesus, the triumph of God over Satan, the prince of the power of the air, and all those forces arrayed against [God and the plan of redemption] is affirmed clearly in God’s Word: “. . . *he disarmed the rulers and authorities. . .*” Consequently, if we continue now to experience opposition, it is at the Lord’s discretion. Then we recognize that God has a purpose for them. What is the purpose for the continued opposition to those who believe in Christ, the continued opposition to the gospel? The first purpose we should recognize is that it is to strengthen and deepen our faith in and dependence on God. The [special music today] was as if it was written about the subject of the sermon! It was an exact statement of that theme. Ask yourself the question; in your own personal life when have been the occasions that you have sought the Lord’s face most consistently and desired to have the sense of His nearness, His supporting and comforting presence? It is almost without exception when we face tremendous trials and opposition and we feel, we discover, we know again the reality of our dependence upon God. God wants us to be deepened in that awareness and to know with greater and greater skill how to draw strength from [that awareness]. So the purpose for the opposition is to strengthen and to deepen our faith and dependence upon God. This is beautifully illustrated in Romans 5:2-5. Please turn there and read. This is one of a number of places [in

scripture] that gives us a snapshot of the dynamic of Christian growth all encapsulated in just a few verses. Paul begins this little section by referring our being justified by faith; we have been adopted by God, drawn into His family through our faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. He continues:

“Through Jesus we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God—there is your eternal perspective—Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings—notice that we are in exactly the same place as Paul is with the Philippians—knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

I have been reading recently a series of books dealing with a profound challenge to the Christian community. That [challenge] is, what are we going to do about witnessing for Jesus Christ to people who struggle with same-sex desires, homosexuals? You know what the average Christian does to that person? “Excuse me; you are going to go to hell.” End of story. How, then, will they ever hear the gospel? So one of the stories that I read recently from a man who has devoted his life to pursuing this [witness] is that he met with an individual monthly for six years, and three days before the man died he accepted Christ. Absolutely, praise God! What did it take for that man to survive for six years: please, please, please, please! It takes endurance. It takes character. It takes being able to draw on the strength of God to not lose hope because you know that God loves you, and if He had the patience to draw you to Himself, He might also draw the next one. That is why this is so essential.

Because there is another side to this same truth; the other side to the same truth is that the conflict with our opponents also reveals the real state of things for them. See again Philippians 1:28, “...*this is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.*” So we hand out the gospel, we extend the love of Christ, we do whatever we can that others would come to know about God and to know who Jesus is and to receive the reality of His forgiving grace, knowing that in the end, if they do not [receive and believe] it is judgment, for God is perfect in His justice. Most of us are blessed to know Dennis Hurt. He is the first person who on a consistent basis in my Christian life would pray and say, “Thank-you Lord for the troubles that we have.

We are reminded here that God is doing many things at the same time. In this instance he is blessing the faithful and He is steadily bringing the faithless to justice. We should be conscious of that.

These truths bring us to the closing two verses of this little paragraph: Philippians 1:29-30. “*For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him—that I hope is true of all in this room—but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.*” Paul at this point presents suffering as a gift from God to believers. How do we understand this? A first consideration is relatively obvious. Few things speak as eloquently of the worth of something as our readiness to pay whatever [the] cost for obtaining, retaining and enjoying it may be. What are you willing to pay to continue enjoying your current blessings? How hard will you fight, how firmly will you place your feet on the ground [of faith], what are you willing to shed off [from your life] so that it will not encumber you for a continued walk of faithfulness? Or, let’s turn it around: take that statement and turn it around: What is the price of your betrayal? What can come into your life that will make you say, “I’ve had it; forget Christ! I’m going for this.”

When we suffer for Jesus, we declare before the world our love for Him, and we declare to the world how much He is worth to us. This is what we hear from Jesus’ first disciples. Look to Acts 5:41. I will read it. Luke writes [that the disciples’] first response to being arrested by the Jewish authorities – remember that I said that the first persecution of the church came from the Israeli religious establishment so that when the Apostles decided to preach the gospel they were arrested and thrown into prison – afterwards this is what they had to say about their experience: *“They left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”* See how backward that is, how upside down that is: most of us think that if we get in trouble for our faith that is bad news! But what these men say is, “No, no, I got in a lot of trouble for Jesus; hallelujah; Jesus considers me worthy to suffer for His name.” Why are they worthy? [They are worthy] because they stood their ground. They did not cave. They did not betray. They remained faithful. Aren’t those sweet words? Think about the man who went out to save his friend [who lay stricken under enemy gunfire on the battle] field [even though the friend died]. Do you know what the real story is for that? How many men watched that guy go out there and crawl back inch by inch by inch until finally he arrived and they said to themselves, “Why would you do that?” The answer is obvious: I love my buddy. The answer is obvious for us too: why do we do that? “It is because I love Jesus.”

In Philippians 1:27 remember that this whole little portion is introduced by this statement: *“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”* We see that suffering for the name of Jesus is part of what is meant by living in a manner of life that is worthy of the gospel. Suffering is a gift in the same way that ministry is a mercy, the opportunity to serve. You can see that in 2 Corinthians 4:1, *“Therefore having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.”* Just picture this for a moment. Why would Paul say that? In order for him to carry out his ministry, what did he endure? He was thrown in prison, he was stoned, he was beaten with rods, he was driven out town. “Oh goodie; I am going to go with Paul and maybe I will be beaten with rods!” That is bizarre until we put it in the perspective of what it costs to bring Christ into a world that doesn’t want Him. So much of the evangelical church today in America has convinced itself that really everybody wants Jesus; that’s what they really want, and all we have to do is figure out a nice happy, pleasant way of presenting Jesus and they are all going to say, “Yes”, which is odd if you happen to read the Bible. The Bible never talks like that.

In both of these cases [the readiness to suffer for the sake of Jesus’ name and the call to ministry or serving others] we receive the opportunity to grow in our love and demonstrate that love to the world, which is for the glory of God.

According to Paul’s instructions to Timothy given in chapter 2 of the first letter to Timothy, verses one and two, this is what he says. We are to pray that the church may enjoy peace. How many have been praying like that for our church? I hope! This is what Paul says, *“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions. . . .”* So I have to pray for Obama? OK, I will pray for Obama. But the issue here is why [we are to do these things]. It is, *“...that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”* How can we think about this? Beloved, there are sorrows enough in life without facing the loss of peace and being subject to the noise and tumult of social disorder, political chaos and revolution. How would you like to be a Christian today in Syria? Sometimes people will say this to me and I think to myself, “I am thinking we have a slipped cog in our rational comprehension of the realities of life.”

“What the church needs is a good dose of persecution.” Well, just go to Syria and speak for Christ. What Paul says is that we want peace so that we can live with dignity. It is hard to be living with dignity in a refugee camp.

But at the same time as we pray for peace, if we are wise we prepare to endure. We want to live our life under the conditions of peace preparing for those times when we will have to endure. Many if not all of us know this by personal experience. Jesus made this comment and we should never forget it: they are saved who endure to the end. We would prefer to believe that we are saved without endurance. We have a magical concept of salvation. Give me the right word formula, and if I have the word formula correct, magically I am saved. But that is not what the Bible teaches. What the Bible teaches is that when I close with Christ in faith, and the Spirit of God brings me to conviction of my sin and enters my life, I am changed. I become a new creature in Christ. That new creature in Christ pursues Christ and pursues the holiness of Christ and pursues the righteousness and truth of God. If there is no such pursuit, you are fooled, and best [should] return to the cross of Christ and beg for His mercies. Today we are going to have four baptisms. What a glorious thing! But it is not baptism that saves; it is faith transforming through the power of the Holy Spirit the heart and the mind.

So in times of peace we prepare ourselves in the Lord to endure whatever is demanded of us if we are going to remain faithful to the end. All four of [the baptismal candidates] today are children – well, Regan is not a child; he is as big as his dad! How many of us think they will not have to endure, all four of these, endure things that they have no anticipation of right now, in order to remain faithful with the Christ with whom they will identify today? You bet they will. You and I will pray that they will endure to the end.

It is of God’s mercy that the Lord provides us opportunities to serve on His behalf. Again 2 Corinthians 4:1, *“Therefore having this ministry by the mercy of God...”* Notice what the last part of the statements is: *“...we do not lose heart.”* So if the building burns down after we have spent how many hundreds of thousands of dollars to fix it up what do we do? We take up an offering. And if my buddy dies on the field, what do I do? I remain faithful to the relationship and I go on, because I don’t lose heart. If you come back and you read this full section notice what he says in verse 27, *“I want to hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.”* We stand together in our suffering.

There is a second great reason for our suffering, applying and illustrating Paul’s exhortation that we strive together for the faith of the gospel. When we encounter opposition and with the opposition suffering, we are reminded of the reality of the stakes of this spiritual war that we are in. If we respond in faith with obedience to the word we have received from God, then we will pull together so as to resist the disintegrating forces of the opposition. Here is a question that is totally theoretical. If the church burned down and we took up an offering, how many people from this congregation would go to a different church in town in order to avoid the cost? Honestly, knowing most of you as I do, I think none of you would leave, which is a great tribute to the work of the Spirit of God in transforming the heart and deepening the bonds of fellowship in this congregation. So let me give you another: if you found out that one of the elders was engaged in an extra-marital affair and therefore had brought shame to the church, what would you do? Do we pull together, do we strive together? (By the way, none of them are, so don’t even think about it!) You do understand the point? How many have experienced betrayal? Of course; why do we experience betrayal in the body of Christ? [It is] because we are sinners, that is why! Sinners do really stupid things. They do, they just do stupid things!

If we respond in faith with obedience to the word we have received, we will pull together and resist the forces that desire to disintegrate us. We need to understand: it is not only the seductive voices of opportunity that draw us away from Christ. Here are the seductive voices: ready money. How many give their teenaged children “ready money”? “Easy access”: what is one of the greatest curses on the face of this planet right now? [It is] the internet. Easy access. Under the seductive pull of these things we are led astray to pursue the desires that destroy fellowship. Soon we find we have neglected all of the disciplines of the faith. We know this; this is not strange thinking. Of course this is not the only way the body of Christ is dis-integrated. We are also disintegrated by the experiences of adversity. What does adversity tend to do? It tends to drain our heart of hope. If we have not prepared ourselves to stand fast, if we have not learned how with the disciplines of the faith to be constant and steady in the reading of the word of God, if we have not developed the practice of prayer, if we do not know how to go to our brother or our sister and find counsel and comfort and encouragement, then we lose hope in the face of the adversities that overwhelm us and exhaust our resources and we say to ourselves, “I don’t know what to do.” And in that moment of despair we pursue easy pleasures that erase present pain from our minds. So adversities over an extended period of time can sap the will to resist and to remain faithful. Therefore we despair of living in a manner that is worthy of the gospel.

Learning to rejoice in suffering is a sign of maturity in understanding the nature of the faith. We might ask this question: why does God do this? Why doesn’t God just save us and take us out of the world? I don’t know. This has not been the best week for me. I have encountered things I would prefer not to. I can think of a number of situations where it seems to me it would have been better for God to have just taken them away.

There is an answer of sorts I want you to think about. How many of you are dads? I want you to think about this very carefully. God originally made man to rule the world: Genesis 1:27-29. That was before the fall, before Satan deceived Eve and Adam foolishly turned away from God’s command and plunged all into ruin. However, God does not change His mind. “I am God,” He says. “I am not a man; I do not change.” God accomplishes what He sets out to do. If for no other reason than that God intends that the people of His own possession will judge the angels along with the rest of creation, God is preparing us to rule. It is a future more glorious than you and I can imagine. It is impossible for us to guess what God intends for us. But I would say to every man, every father in this room, we should be raising our children, all of them, with the understanding that God intends us for greatness, that we are to be shaped after the shape of Jesus Christ. We are to have strength of character to withstand every form of corruption. We are to have a wisdom that is able to discern between the right and the left, the good and the bad, the right and the wrong. Why: I do not know, but I don’t have any doubt whatsoever that that is God’s intention. It is obvious that the pathway to that future lies through suffering for Jesus’ sake.

As I mentioned last week, Christians are to live this life with joy. Philippians 2:1-2, “. . .if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” Let me give you a little illustration. If you are a father or a mother, utterly devoted to the wellbeing of your children, desiring that they would take on the character and attributes of Jesus Christ, and you are seeking to prepare them to be those kind of individuals who stand fast to the end and do not give in and do not betray the Lord, and one of them does, what then? Who will comfort? Who will encourage? Who will stand alongside? Who will draw near

with the love of Christ? Who will be there to say, “Do not despair, God will not fail.”? That is who you and I need to be.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father as we listen to You speaking through your servant Paul, we desire that this truth would be printed on the inner man, on the soul, so that we are, our Father, will be counted amongst those who are faithful to the end. We rejoice now in the anticipation of witnessing these four people who are willing to step forward and take a public stand in identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through their baptism. Gracious Father, we know You always fulfill Your word of promise and so we are confident Your blessings, Your wisdom, Your strength, Your joy, Your goodness, Your righteousness, Your truth, Your life will now be their portion, whatever the cost. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Have you experienced opposition either to your words or to you personally on account of your Christian faith? What was your response to this opposition?
2. Do you find it helpful to view personal faith in terms of or as an aspect of spiritual warfare? Do you ever wonder why the war goes on even though God supposedly has won?
3. How has experiencing opposition, resistance or hostility to you as a Christian affected your relationship with God, other believers, your work or study life? (Romans 5:2-5?)
4. What things or aspects of your life do you value most highly and what would you do to preserve them or keep from losing them?
5. What have you done or are you doing to prepare yourself for “staying the course” of faith to the end? Have you at times been discouraged or “lost heart” in your faith?
6. How have you relied on others or been helped by others in times of trial?
7. Which have you found distracts or otherwise weakens your focus on faithfulness, carefree times or hard times?
8. Have you ever questioned the purposes of God in what He has asked or allowed you to endure? In looking back on such times what have you learned?
9. In what ways have you personally grown in the faith and as a person over the past two or three years?
10. Do you live joyfully? What could others do to “compete” your joy?