

Thursday Morning Bible Study:

What It Takes To Pray

Hymns:

234 – Pray Without Ceasing Pray; 228 – My Eyes Ran Down Fountains Of Tears

2. Faith, Hope, Love and Intercession

The triad of faith, hope and love appears above all in the writings of Paul. He sees these three matters as the essence and heart of all Christian living, belonging together in an inseparable unity. He mentions them together in triplets and pairs and singly in all his letters. (Here are passages where two or more are spoken of in close proximity: Rom. 5:1-5, 1Cor. 13:13, 2Cor. 8:7, Gal. 5:5-6, Eph. 1:15-18, 3:17, 6:23, Col. 1:4-5, 23, 1Thess. 1:3, 3:6, 5:8, 2Thess. 1:3, 1Tim. 1:5, 14, 2:15, 4:12, 6:11, 2Tim. 1:13, 2:22, 3:10, Titus 2:2, 3:15 and Philemon 1:5. (And then in some places, where hope is not mentioned there is ‘steadfastness’ or ‘patient endurance’ which is in the New Testament the here-and-now appearance in action of the reality of hope.) And as prayer is also right at the heart of Christian living, these three ‘virtues’ or ‘outworkings of the Holy Spirit in believers’ are essential to intercession. No faith, hope and love (seen in steadfastness and patient endurance) – no true intercession.

What is intercession? At its most basic, intercession is praying for others. But more must be said!

The more important a matter is for us, the more words we have for that matter, the richer the vocabulary, the more refined and defined the terms we use. For example in Inuit languages in northern Canada, there are many different words for snow. To me, untrained and inexperienced in all things alpine and arctic, snow is snow. But not so for the Inuit who live in snow and for whom knowledge of snow is vitally important. In the Scriptures (Old and New Testaments) there are numbers of words for prayer (e.g. supplication, prayer, request, thanksgiving, vow, lament, intercession...) So, to get to the heart of intercession, we need to learn from the Scriptures a more refined definition. Intercession is a *particular* kind of praying. And this particular kind of praying requires that we know and grow in the realities of faith, hope and love.

In the OT, in Isaiah 53:12, the final statement in this great psalm about the servant of the LORD is, ‘He bore the sins of many, and *makes intercession* for the transgressors.’ Intercession is deeply linked to bearing the sins of many, and it also seems to be the outcome of his bearing the sins of many (note the change in tense from past – *bore* – to present – *makes*). Intercession involves getting deeply involved! The Servant of the LORD here stood with sinners before God, standing in their shoes before Him. This picks up vv. 4-6 ‘Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and by his wounds we are healed.’

The servant undergoes all this by the will of God – v. 6 ‘And the LORD has laid on him...’, v. 10 ‘Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; He has put him to grief.’ This means that from the servant’s side it is an act of obedience, which means an act of faith, hope and love. Obedience only makes sense as godly obedience when it is comprised of those three elements – trust in God, confidence in the future that God is working, and love for Him. The servant identifies with sinners in this suffering, and

this is the cause of great honour from God. He sees his faith, hope and love reach the goal and is satisfied (vv. 10-12).

He came to do what no one can or would do, but the LORD's hand was not shortened (Isa. 59:1-7), Despite Israel's dreadful state, where their iniquities had made a separation between them and God, their sins had hidden His face from them and closed His ears to them, and all the misery, pain, brokenness and sorrow that followed, v. 16 tells us that the LORD saw it and was displeased that none could *intercede*, and so He worked His own salvation. The heart of God's intercession for us is His love. He sends His Son because He loves the world (John 3:16). The Son came and gave himself for us from love (Gal. 2:20). When we were dead in our sins and trespasses, God being rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:4-5). And now our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father, *who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace*, comfort our hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

There is a deep connection in the New Testament between this passage from Isaiah and Jesus' bearing of the sins of the world and His ongoing intercession for the people that this sin-bearing redemption has gathered, through faith worked by the gospel message, from every people, tribe and tongue on the face of the whole earth. Jesus Christ is this Suffering Servant (Heb. 9:28 seems to refer back to this passage) and it is as the outcome of his sin-bearing that he now sits at the Father's right hand (Heb. 10:12) which is where he intercedes for the church (Rom. 8:34). Jesus' sin-bearing act was an act of faith, hope and love toward God the Father. Faith: 1Peter 2:23 tells us that Jesus, when he was reviled, did not revile in return and, when he suffered, did not threaten, but *continue entrusting himself to Him who judges justly*. Hope: It was for the joy that was set before him that Christ endured the suffering of the cross (Heb. 12:2).

The intercession of Jesus for us turns us into intercessors. The Spirit of God, poured out by Jesus who makes intercession for us, enables us in faith, hope and love to intercede for this world. The same Spirit that empowered Jesus for his great intercession is now given to us, and the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts (1John 4:10-11) and so we love one another. We are through the Spirit made to be imitators of God as His beloved children, walking in love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:1-2).

This prayerfulness stands in the gap – just as Jesus stood in the gap. It is a prayerfulness that stands under the weight that others bear. It is not stand-offish, it is not at a distance, there is no reluctance to be involved.

The Spirit teaches us to pray and assists us. Who of us could do the above of ourselves? The Spirit takes our wordless sighs and fears and groans for others and makes them prayer. There is in intercession the outflow of tears, a sharing in pain (Heb. 5:7, Php. 3:18, 2Cor. 2:4, Acts 20:31.) Jeremiah puts it most poignantly (9:1): 'Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people.' Intercession involves involvement, a real knowledge. In intercession we get near to sinners and sufferers. There is nothing convenient about God's love, nor about intercession for the people of God. There is *striving* needed, and that word has all the sense of the discipline, training, struggle and effort of an athlete or soldier. Rom. 15:30: 'I

appeal to you brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.’

Intercession, being a matter of faith and hope, is deeply connected to the will of God, i.e. to the plan and purpose of God in eternity, from creation to new creation as it is worked out in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. To pray according to the will of God is prayer that is grounded in this grand plan and purpose. We know this plan in Christ and through the Scriptures. One prayer that undergirds all prayer is then that we grow in our understanding of the will of God. ‘From the day we heard [of your faith in Christ and love in the Spirit] 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’ (Col. 1:9).

Hope is the expectation of, and longing for, the culmination of the plan of God on the day of Jesus Christ. (Lose sight of that great day and prayer will wither. You’ll simply be interested in human flourishing in the ‘here and now.’ You’ll become a small-time activist [small-time in the sense of no sense of eternity]). Faith is the assurance of things hoped for that enables us in the here and now 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; being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to God who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light (Col. 1:9ff.).

Next week we will talk about this from the perspective of self-control, perseverance, endurance and patience in prayer. Somewhere I read the line (I don’t think it is my own!) ‘Prayer is not a power until it is persistent!’ Unless we have faith, hope and love, unless we believe in the final triumph of the Father’s plan of love, we won’t pray. Prayer is power because of these things. Prayer does not coerce our will onto God, but rather prayer is insistence on the will of God against all that seems to be frustrating, retarding or working against that will. Prayer strongly insists, ‘Thy will be done!’ And this is no weak acquiescent acceptance of circumstances as they are. The more we know the hope to which we are called, the more faith gives us assurance of that hope, the more that we discover the height and length and breadth and depth of the love of God in Christ, the more persistent and strong will be our praying.