

LET YOUR REQUESTS BE MADE KNOWN TO GOD

SERIES: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

By Steve Zeisler

Not many will know that I was a superhero as a child. Visitors to our home would have seen a chubby 8-year old asthmatic who stayed at home for long stretches of the summer when ragweed pollen was in the air. Now, I realize that seeing this sculpted, athletic figure before you, the idea that I was a chubby asthmatic as a child is going to be a stretch for you, but all of this is true.

Staying inside for long periods in the summer led, in my case, to a love of reading—especially reading stories of grand worlds, magic kingdoms and power rings, secret passages, aliens in disguise, heroes with great courage, hidden powers and loyal friends. I would use my imagination to cast stories with imaginary friends, and in our adventures I was always the central and heroic figure.

It is true that every difficulty we get dealt in life, every disappointment or weakness ends up working to our advantage. When we are weak, we are strong. It took me a long time to gain this perspective, but I have a particular gratitude now for the time when illness helped strengthen my imagination. I have since discovered in the wisdom of scripture that invisible realities are, in fact, the greater thing. The apostle Paul says, “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18). We gaze at what we cannot see. We are determined to believe and be guided by things that are invisible to us because they last forever. What we can see is only temporary.

G.K. Chesterton once made an observation about the ancient myths. He said that the Christian gospel comes to us like other myths, the stories of what the world is like and what it means to be human and how things are. But the difference in the case of the gospel is that it is not only mythical, it is also true. Consider the contemporary search for a “meta-narrative.” What is the big story that makes sense of the world as we understand it? The gospel is that. It is the great myth, the great meta-narrative; it is also gloriously true.

If these are our convictions, how do we participate in what we can't see? How do we take part in what is unavailable to the senses? The primary means is prayer. When we pray, we enter into God's presence; we join with angels and other invisible beings that are always before his face. We draw on power that cannot be explained; we are both strengthened in this world and participants in great things that last forever. Prayer is the primary means of being part of a world that we can't see and can't measure.

Today we are beginning a series of studies on prayer. We will consider prayers that were recorded in the Bible by various people, both Old and New Testament. We will look at the setting in which the prayer was offered, the circumstances of the individuals or groups expressing themselves in prayer, and then study the actual content of the prayer—learning to pray.

Everyone I know, and I'm at the front of this line, feels inadequate in prayer. In these studies we will learn from those in generations before us who spoke to God in their real-life circumstances. Next week we will talk about Moses at the nadir of his life—in his worst days, encountering a God who spoke to him from a bush that was burning without being consumed. That extraordinary conversation changed him, and the world, forever. Subsequently, we will hear Hannah

pour out her broken heart before God as she longed for a child she couldn't have and what resulted from her prayers, and so on throughout the rest of the series.

I decided to preach this series at this time because of a peculiar contemporary phenomenon. To the astonishment of everyone, a small book by a man named Bruce Wilkinson called *The Prayer of Jabez* has been the top best seller in this country for months, not just in Christian circles, but everywhere. Though there are some things about the *Jabez* phenomenon that may deserve critique, in general it has been used very powerfully of God for one primary reason: most of us live with a sense of defeat about our lives in prayer. In the words of James, "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:2b).

Some of the things that hang us up in prayer might include a sense of phoniness. We have repeated the same words over and over; we don't have any emotional connection to them. Our prayers seem like an expression of unreality. Some feel that it's futile perhaps. Nothing ever changes anyway, so what's the point? Some of us experience unworthiness in approaching God in prayer; the sense that we are too failed, too degraded and too sinful to go to a holy God in prayer and it's our sins that keep us from him. Some just feel like they don't know the right words—lack of spiritual expertise. If we really knew God, we would speak to him in Latin, use beautiful words, or theological jargon.

I want to urge us to make progress together as men and women of prayer. Although in this series we will look at actual prayers, our starting point today is not one of the prayers of the Bible, but Paul's instruction for prayer. These are the first verses that I ever memorized without meaning to. Having read them over and over again, I found myself wanting to understand them and feeling that there was an important message for me.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:6, 7)

For context, it turns out that the book of Philippians is actually filled with the same sort of things that I loved in my superhero days, when my imagination was learning to express itself. This is a book that is filled with dangers and secrets. The apostle writes from prison, but considers imprisonment nothing in comparison of the greatness of his mission. His chains don't bother him. He expects to die, and remains fearless. He is about his master's good work and that is more important than the difficulties of his circumstances. He rises above them in Christ.

Paul calls on his listeners in these words: "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life..." (Phil. 2:14-16a). That's pretty good stuff—crooked and depraved generation, wickedness everywhere, bright stars shining, committed to truth, glorious themes, and loyal friends. Paul is unfailing when attacked—he strains for heaven, he views scars as badges of honor, and sweeps aside difficulties with hope in the Lord. Everywhere in this book there is rejoicing, drawn from confidence in unseen realities—the glorious world to come and a tender, powerful presence of God's Spirit now. It's the call to grand living in a hard and difficult world that misunderstands God and misunderstands us.

At the end of the book there is instruction on prayer. It is the culmination of what he wants to say: "Be this, live this, participate in this great opportunity." The passage we are studying is one that is beloved in every generation of Christians. It is a source of great encouragement. Philippians 4:4-9:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Believers are called to respond—to act, to choose. “Rejoice! Forbear! Request! Think of these things, do these things.” But those are not the most important phrases in these verses. The foundational things that make our response reasonable are the claims made about God. There are three statements about God that are very important. First, at the end of verse 5, Paul says, “The Lord is near.” Second, at the end of verse 7, Paul says, “The peace of God... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”—the peace of God that is beyond our ability to understand or fathom. Finally, at the end of verse 9, it says, “...the God of peace will be with you.”

Based on these claims about the person and nature and working of God, we are instructed to act in a certain way. That is always true in the gospel. We are called to respond on the basis of all that God has done: his prior statements, his character, his coming, his offering of himself, and his declaration of forgiveness.

What are these three statements about the actions or nature of God? The first is that the Lord is near. What does that mean? There is some debate about this amongst scholars, but it means almost certainly that the Lord is near in time, that he is at hand. He is about to arrive. The next statement (verse 7) is that the peace of God becomes a guard when we are facing anxious moments, or facing frightening, difficult and pressure-filled circumstances. The Holy Spirit places a guard over us—he defends our hearts and minds. The third statement at the end of verse 9 that says, “the God of peace will be with you” almost certainly means he is near in space. That is, he is your direct companion. It is his breath that is whispering in your ear. It is his face that is smiling encouragement at you. It is his arm that has embraced you.

All of these are a tremendous encouragement. Consider the statement, “the Lord is near in time.” Jesus told his followers in some of his strongest language to stay awake, to expect his imminent return in history. This may be the day when he decides to end human history as we know it, when he steps back at the sound of a trumpet into this world and everything is changed. He may be near because some miraculous event will occur for you this afternoon. You may see in a vision, you may hear some word from God, some sense of his presence, some call, some opportunity, some life-changing touch from the Lord today.

It may be that you will die. None of us knows if we will be alive tomorrow. He may be near to you because your life has finished its course, you have accomplished everything he expects from you, and he will call you home. So, whether it's in history, whether it's a miracle, or the end of our assignment on earth, it is important to live knowing that our Savior fills the next minute. What is rushing towards us from the future is the Lord Jesus himself. Let's rejoice, therefore, and let our defensiveness fall off to become gentle, confident, and joy-filled people because the future is filled with Christ.

I remember the months before Leslie and I got married. We got engaged in September and married the following March. It seemed like the first weeks and months just dragged on forever. “October, November—they're all the same... months away from now we're going to get married.” Until about the last week or so—and then everything changed because the day was near. I remember thinking, “I'll never call her on this phone again,” or “I'll never gaze out this window as a single man again.” Clif Davidson was the best man at our wedding. All the groomsmen stayed at his

parents' house in Castro Valley the night before the wedding. There were seven of us. I slept in a double bed with Frank Holman. I remember thinking, "This is the last night that I will sleep in a double bed with someone like Frank."

I was nervous, I was excited, and I was anticipatory. Everything was filled with portent because the day was near. The great moment of the future had rushed up close. The Lord is near, so rejoice, forbear, and be gentle, pray. He is near, and he is your companion. It is his tender heart that is closer to you than any other. He knows and loves you. He stands by you. He is the one who won't abandon you.

The particular verses that we are going to focus on today are verses 6 and 7. Let me make some observations and urge you to further meditation of these great verses on your own.

Note first the inclusive language: "[In nothing: no thing, not one] be anxious... in *everything*, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving. [And] the peace of God, which transcends *all* understanding..." It's not just a minor mystery; it is a surpassing mystery. The language is big and inclusive. It deliberately admits no boundary or exceptions. He does not say, "Don't be anxious for most things, but cancer and kids on drugs are clearly an exception; you ought to be anxious about those." He doesn't say, "Pray about the big stuff: life, death, Christmas, Easter and all the great theological themes, but the little things in your life are up to you to take care of, so get on with it."

Pray about *everything*. He says to pray as if the most ordinary things in your life are important to God because they are in your life. He doesn't say, "The mystery of the peace of God surpasses the understanding of ordinary folks, but there are a lot of smart people that have it figured out." No, it surpasses *all* understanding. No one will be able to fathom the beautiful presence of the peace of God; it will always be greater and more marvelous than any tongue can tell.

My favorite visual image of this sort of life of daily prayer—praying about everything—is Tevye, the milkman of *Fiddler on the Roof*. It's a story about Orthodox Jews living in a small town in Russia. Eventually they are persecuted and forced to leave. The central figure is this milkman named Tevye. Frequently he is on the stage by himself, either singing or talking. But when he is talking by himself he is talking to God: "Dear Lord, my horse is lame... it's the Sabbath, the sun is going down... the rabbi doesn't have his milk..." Then, he prays about his daughters and their marriages and their futures. He prays about money, he prays about Golde, his wife; he prays about profound and ordinary things and everything in between. Throughout his day he talks to God.

The story ends tragically, of course. The Jews are attacked and forced to leave their village. Tevye is a man who walks with God and when he heads off there is hardship and pain. But he is leaving with the same God who knew him in Russia and who is going to go with him to America. The call here is to believe that God loves us enough that everything about our lives, whether they are small worries or great ones, are important to him. "In everything make requests."

There are no exceptions, no boundaries, and no subjects in which prayers to God are unacceptable. There is one condition, though. The condition for the life of prayer described here is thankfulness: "...in everything, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God." The call is to approach prayer, by all grace possible, believing that you are speaking to somebody who loves you, who has already done you good, and who is due your thanks. Someone who has already, even in the difficulty of your circumstances, anticipated a good outcome. You are not waking God up to attend to you as if he hasn't done so yet, but you are speaking to one who is near, who is your companion, who wants to care for you. So, therefore, thankfulness is the proper condition in which we speak to God: "Lord, you are good; Lord, you are good to me," as the lyrics of the song go.

The longer I live, the more certain I am that the greatest mark of the presence of God in someone's life is an underlying core of gratitude. "I am getting better than what I deserve. However hard it is, I am aware that Jesus died for me. I have

life forever in him. I owe everything to my Savior.” However chaotic the circumstances, there is a core of thankfulness in the person who is spiritually mature.

The words “prayer,” “petition” and “request” are not esoteric, tricky words. “By prayer” just means “conversation with God.” “By petition” just means “asking for something”—that is, listing things that concern you, offering your hopes and dreams and longings and confusions and bringing God the things that make up your life. “Request” just means “request.” This is not deep, mysterious, difficult language—climbing some vast mountain to get superior wisdom that allows you to use language that God can hear. This is very ordinary language: “Let your requests be made known to God.”

There is a story of a young pastor in his first pastorate. He is unsure of himself and fresh out of seminary, filled with the language of theological study but has never really led a congregation. He is praying before a church gathering, leading them in corporate prayer. He raises his hands and changes his voice: “We approach you, O sacred ground of all being, who dwells beyond language in ineffable splendor. Thou who art both paradoxically imminent and transcendent at once...” and as he takes another breath, an old saint in the front row says, “Son, just call him Father and ask for something.” There is a lot of wisdom in that. “Let your requests be made known to God.”

Finally, we observe that when we make petitions in the face of anxiety, the peace of God will garrison our hearts. “Garrison” is a military term. This is battle language. Anxiety comes as an enemy, a force, a pressure. It is real and persuasive, and we become more and more anxious. So we go into battle by praying through our anxiety. He will post an armed guard around our hearts and our minds. He deals with the pressure that anxiety brings by mounting a defense of his own peace.

You will notice that the outcome of all of this is not necessarily changed circumstances. Getting something you want is not the focus. It is true that God may change the circumstances. The things you pray about may very well result in predictable or unpredictable outcomes. But that’s not the point being made here. The point is peace, apart from any discussion of changed circumstances. The peace of God will protect you regardless of what you observe around you. One legitimate concern about *The Prayer of Jabez* regards how near the author comes to saying that you get what you want by praying, and that you can predict how God will respond. No, the outcome of this call to prayer is a guarded interior—a garrisoned heart, a peace of God that fights back for us.

To conclude, we have said that the Lord is near in time. The Lord is near in space. The God of peace is our companion. The peace of God guards our interior, and because of what we know of the purposes and claims and reality of God, we are emboldened to pray. To talk about things that matter to us. To take our lives and put them in God’s presence. To go boldly before him and not worry about how anyone would measure it ahead of time. To be people who realize that we are loved and pray with a sense of that boldness. Who knows where it’s going to lead? Who knows where he will take the conversation once we begin it? Who knows what he has to say to us? Once we come before him and speak of ourselves, he will listen, and love us, and he may well extend the conversation into all kinds of wonderful places.

The best drama, the best story (in my opinion), is the story Jesus told of the waiting father, better known as the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is a marvelous word about the ways of God. There are many layers and wonderful truths in the story of the Prodigal Son. But one of my favorite things about the story is the rehearsed speech of the sinner. It’s the broken human soul returning to God, which is of course what the story is about. In his destitution, in his failure, after humiliating his father and living a dissolute, ruined life—everything is gone and he is starving to death, eating with pigs—the prodigal decides to work out the speech he will make to his father. The story is told in Luke, chapter 15:

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him [notice that he is

working on his prayer to get the language just right]: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men” (Luke 15:17-19).

He is working on the abject phrasing and contrite body language. He wants the prayer to be right before he offers it, like so many of us do, “Boy, if I could just figure out how to say this, then finally, I will go to God with my prayer.” And, of course, he is on the journey back and his father, who has been looking down the road waiting for him, comes running, pressing forward for his son. He begins the speech, but the father won’t let him finish! He interrupts him with blessing. The rehearsed, controlled, thought out expression wasn’t necessary. His father already loved him. He was looking for him. He had a robe and a ring prepared on the hope that his son would come back. And when the son returns, the father calls for a party.

We would pray better if we worried less about how it sounded and were more certain that God is already looking down the road. He is already running for us. He is waiting for us, and how we sound is less important than our willingness to approach him—the willingness to turn back from whatever else there is and head in his direction. The simple outcome of this is to lose our inhibitions as men and women of prayer. He is near. His peace will guard our hearts. Therefore, call him Father and ask him for something.

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