

This Is Our Prayer

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a five-part series drawn from Philippians

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2 Chronicles 1:7-12 (NRSV)

⁷That night God appeared to Solomon, and said to him, “Ask what I should give you.” ⁸Solomon said to God, “You have shown great and steadfast love to my father David, and have made me succeed him as king. ⁹O LORD God, let your promise to my father David now be fulfilled, for you have made me king over a people as numerous as the dust of the earth. ¹⁰Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can rule this great people of yours?” ¹¹God answered Solomon, “Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked for possessions, wealth, honor, or the life of those who hate you, and have not even asked for long life, but have asked for wisdom and knowledge for yourself that you may rule my people over whom I have made you king, ¹²wisdom and knowledge are granted to you. I will also give you riches, possessions, and honor, such as none of the kings had who were before you, and none after you shall have the like.”

Acts 9:36-43 (NRSV)

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” ³⁹So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Philippians 1:1-11 (NIV)

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

²Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. ⁸God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

⁹And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

If we are honest with ourselves, we have lots of questions swirling around the topic of prayer. What is it really? What should we pray for? Does it make a difference? The Bible is replete with stories of prayer and pray-ers. This week, we'll look at a few.

This week, we begin a new series. Each week’s study will be drawn from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Though Paul is imprisoned and half-expecting the arrival of the executioner, this is a letter filled with much joy. It is a deeply personal letter that reveals to us much about this apostle and his life with Christ. Each week we’ll be talking about a faith skill that our children will be learning in Vacation Bible School this summer (yes, it is almost that time of year again!). This first week, our focus is on prayer and we begin with stories of some pray-ers.

A prayer for wisdom

As King David approached his death, he named his son, Solomon, to succeed him as Israel's king. Solomon would take Israel to its greatest heights of wealth and political power. Solomon would build the Lord's temple in Jerusalem, a temple that would stand for nearly four centuries. But before all this, Solomon assembled the people of Israel at the tabernacle, the moveable dwelling place of God that would be replaced by Solomon's temple. There, during several days of ritual, God appeared to Solomon and said, "What can I give you?" Now, I don't know what I might have asked of God, but I fear I might not have been as mature as Solomon. He did not ask for more stuff or more money or better health or a long life. Instead, Solomon asked for the wisdom and knowledge to rule well. And God gave him as he asked. Indeed, God gave much more to Solomon than he even asked for.

The wisdom for which Solomon prayed was not political astuteness or common sense or street smarts. Wisdom in the Bible is knowing the way of God. Wisdom is the way of the righteous and the upright. The wise king would be a king who knows and does the moral will of God. We grow in wisdom as we come to know God, loving him and loving our neighbor. In this opening chapter of 2 Chronicles, Solomon is a model of spirituality; his prayers and his will conform to the will of God. Solomon seems already to possess that which he prays for – wisdom. Perhaps, there are times when God has already given us what we seek . . . we need only discover that it is so.

A prayer for healing

Our second story of prayer is from the book of Acts and it contrasts sharply with the story of Solomon's prayer. Here, in Acts 9, Luke takes us from Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus to Peter's ministry in Judea.¹ First, we are told that Peter went to the town of Lydda where he healed Aeneas, a man who had been bedridden for eight years, causing many people to become followers of Jesus.

Tabitha lived in nearby Joppa² and devoted herself to serving others, particularly widows. Widows led a hard life in ancient cultures; they needed all the help that Tabitha could provide. She worked so hard for the widows, running from one place to another, that she earned the nickname, the "gazelle." When Tabitha fell ill and died, the widows were terrified – who would look after them? It seems that Peter's reputation as a healer was widespread, for Tabitha's friends sent for Peter, thinking that he can raise the dead! When Peter arrived, he was met by the widows who showed him garments that Tabitha had made, tangible evidence of Tabitha's charity. Going upstairs, Peter asked everyone to leave the room. Alone with the body, Peter knelt and prayed.

We don't know the content of Peter's prayer, but we don't really need to. From beginning to end, the Bible is filled with the stories of "pray-ers." David prays for forgiveness.

Solomon prays for wisdom. Elijah throws himself across the body of a dead boy and prays that God would revive him. On the eve of his death, Jesus prays that another path forward might open for him. In Joppa, Peter prays that that Tabitha might be returned to life and she is. This is not magic; it is God's power at work through Peter's close communion with his Lord.

Sometimes we are tempted to view such miraculous answers to prayer as those rare occasions when God (whom we mistakenly think of as a sort of absentee landlord) chooses to intervene in the natural order of life. But this is not the biblical view. Instead, God is active and caring in the world, in our lives, every day and in all ways. Prayer is not a once-in-a-while request. Peter lived in unceasing conversation with God, confident that God listens and loves and acts – so should we.

A prayer for love

As Paul contemplates what might well be his impending death, he writes a brief letter to his dear friends in Philippi, a city in Macedonia where Paul had started a small community of believers (see Acts 16:16-40). They had been through a lot, including the brief imprisonment

¹These events take place perhaps three or so years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

²This is modern-day Jaffa and is part of metropolitan Tel Aviv, on the shores of the Mediterranean.

of Paul and Silas. Now, some years later, Paul pours out his heart to his brothers and sisters in Christ.

He tells them that he prays for them often and always with great joy, for they have never failed to be Paul's partners in the sharing of the gospel. They are both a strength and a comfort as Paul endures another ordeal.

And Paul prays for them. This is called an intercessory prayer – interceding with God on behalf of another. What does he ask of God? That the Philippian believers would abound in love, that they would be giant over-flowing fountains of love. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul's prayer (1:9-11) in this way:

So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.

I'm sure we all pray the best for others from time to time – but I wonder how often we see "the best" in the way that Paul does. No mention here of health or wealth or prosperity, other than being prosperous in love.

What really is prayer?

We pray when we plead to God for help in times of need. We pray when we thank God for all we have and enjoy. We pray when we praise God. We pray when we reveal to God our concerns for others. We pray when we pause to reflect upon the deep love that God has for us all. We pray when we offer our own love to God. In his well-known book, *Prayer*, Richard Foster writes about 21 forms of prayer. But even Foster does not exhaust prayer's meaning. Prayer is all this and more.

It is very easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that prayer consists only of the words spoken to God. But Paul can urge the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" because he knows that prayer is not a paragraph but a life. When we live with God at the center of all we do, when we live in oneness with Jesus Christ, we are living a life of prayer, a life of constant conversation with God. Sometimes this conversation is spoken aloud (at least on our end!). Sometimes this conversation is spoken in silence. And sometimes this conversation is only felt. Indeed, there are times when God carries us in this conversation. Paul wrote this to the Christians in Rome: "And the Holy Spirit helps us in our distress. For we don't even know what we should pray for, nor how we should pray. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will" (Romans 8:26-27, NLT).

Can prayer really change what happens?

I considered for a while the title for this section of the study. I wanted something clear and penetrating. Too often when we talk about prayer we limit ourselves to the change prayer makes in ourselves and in our relationship with God. But there is this ever-present question as to whether prayer can actually change the course of events. We pray for a friend's recovery from illness. We pray that we and our home would be spared from a devastating storm. Then, our home is destroyed and a loved one lost. Not surprisingly, we wonder whether our prayers have any real effect at all. Or we begin to think that we prayed poorly, or lacked faith, or, worse, that perhaps there is simply no one on the other end of the line.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes:

God's response to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does and does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes

prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. And of course God doesn't respond to this. You wouldn't either.

Part of the problem is that we fail to comprehend how God has freely chosen to work in this world. God works through us. Going back to the creation story, we were the ones tasked with filling the world and subduing it. It is a mistake to think that when it comes to life, we do part A and God does part B. Or that we "let go and let God," waiting for God to do it all. Or that we try to do it all. Rather, we do it all *and* God does it all.

If I go back to school so I can get a better job, it will change the course of the future. But when it comes to God, all of a sudden I believe that what I do (pray) is pointless and has no effect – on God or on the future.

Our prayers not only do us good, they do God good, and they can affect the course of events. God works with my hands, my intellect, *and* my prayers. Indeed, the more fully I embrace a genuine trusting and faithful relationship with God the better instrument I become for God's purposes and my own. Yes, the truth is that our friends die prematurely and storms strike, but as Terence Fretheim writes:³

We confess that in response to prayer (and in other ways) God is at work in these devastating effects to bring about positive results in and through human (and other) agents. But one must also speak a "Who knows?" (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14) or a "Perhaps" (Jonah 3:9 GNT) with regard to the effect of the divine work upon specific persons and particular generations. It is not a question as to whether God wills good in the situation, but whether, given God's own self-limited ways of responding to evil and its effects in the world, what can actually be done and how and when.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Spend some time reflecting on and talking about the stories of Solomon and Tabitha. See where they take you. Does Solomon's prayer seem . . . safe? Where do we find the relevance of Tabitha's story? I dare say none of us are likely to pray for the raising of the dead! What do these stories say about taking risks in prayer? What did Solomon risk? Peter? Our prayers and God's answers are embedded in a community of relationships and a web of consequences. This is so because God is not an absentee landlord; rather, his work and his mercy extend to every corner of our lives. How can we begin to see the God's work in a more immediate and tangible way?
2. Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim claims the Bible reveals that our prayers can change the future. You can influence God to do something that God would not have done without your prayer. Do you really think this is so? Is it just too hard for you to believe that God would pay that much attention to what you say? If it is hard for you believe, what do you do with the stories of Moses and Hezekiah (see 2 Kings 20:1-11 for Hezekiah's amazing story)? What really makes them so different from you? Dallas Willard says if we don't believe that our prayers make a real difference, then it is psychologically impossible to pray as we should. What do you think he means? Do you agree? How can we strengthen our confidence that God not only listens to us but responds with both compassion and action?
3. In his *Workbook of Living Prayer*, Maxie Dunnam writes about the "Jesus Prayer." This is a very simple, one-sentence prayer that Christians have prayed for centuries. Indeed, read the last line of Wesley's prayer of submission in the page two text box. The prayer goes like this:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Take a few minutes, center yourself on this simple prayer and silently repeat it to yourself several times. Then say it aloud, slowly and thoughtfully, at least five times. If you are part of a group, have someone lead the group in saying this prayer aloud in unison.

After you've spent some time simply saying the prayer, reflect on it and talk about its meaning to you. What is it about this prayer that would have given it such endurance in the Christian community? What is the value in learning and praying prayers like this one, prayers that have been written and used by others?

³ from Fretheim's book, *Creation Untamed*, Baker Academic, 2010. p. 146-147

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, 1 Chronicles 29 In his last speech, King David appeals to the people for money to build the temple and offers a prayer of praise.	Tuesday, 1 Kings 8:22-53 Solomon's prayer of dedication for the temple
Wednesday, Nehemiah 1 Nehemiah prays for help as he asks the King of Persia that he be allowed to begin the rebuilding of Jerusalem.	Thursday, Matthew 26:36-44 Jesus prays in Gethsemane on the eve of his death.
Friday, Ephesians 3:14-21 One of Paul's prayers for the Ephesians	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class - now studying the Gospel of Mark

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

May 26 – We are talking about Mormonism

Beginning June 2 – a four week series:

Old Testament Turning Points

Beginning June 30 – a three-week series
with Dr. Ted Campbell from SMU's Perkins Seminary
"Why Methodist Matters"

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes