

“Prayer”

2 Thessalonians - More about the End Times

2 Thessalonians 3:1-6

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Jeff: All right. Why don't we start with a word of prayer before we move into our section that we're looking at today? So why don't we pray?

Father, we thank You for this day and for the blessing of life in Christ. Thank You for the time that You've given us today. Lord, we recognize, as we do every day, that our times are in Your hands. And in one sense there's nothing new about that recognition. It is true, and we're thankful for it. But Father, as we come to a new day we recognize that Your mercies are new every morning, which means that sins are forgiven, put in the past, forgotten. And new opportunities arise for us to exercise godliness. So Father, help us to put off our old ways and our old habits of the old man, and help us to put on the new, that we might not only be transformed, but that others might see that transformation taking place.

Father, we ask that Your hand would be upon us for good as we study Your word today. And Lord, as we take up the topic of prayer we ask that You will teach us and instruct us. But not only that; we pray, Father, that there would be some level of motivation that is enacted in our lives by Your Spirit and the Word. And we pray that we would be praying men. Father, we ask that Your hand would be upon us for that endeavor, for we know that You are a prayer hearing God. And we know that oftentimes things that are in the world are in the world because of lack of prayer. And we know that we miss opportunities and miss blessings. And we know, Father, that we neglect what we ought to do. But we also know that we forsake blessings that could be ours. So Lord, we ask that You'll teach us and instruct us, and that You'll help us.

Father, today as we gather we also think of our brother Don. We think of Kevin. We think of those who are sick and ailing. We ask that You would minister to them, that You will come alongside of them and encourage their hearts. We know, Father, that Your indwelling Spirit is not only the divine Persuader of truth but is also the Comforter. And we ask that You would bring comfort where needed.

Lord, we ask that You'll open our eyes to the truth of Your word, that You'll teach us in it. And we pray, Father, that as a result we would be different, that we would be better men, better in the sense that we are more in Christ, more in tune with Your word and walking according to His gait. And so, Lord, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen.

Jeff: Okay. Well let's turn our attention to 2 Thessalonians. And today we are continuing in the series that we started a few weeks ago now. And I want us to just take a look at where we've been. What?

Mike Davis: A few weeks ago.

Jeff: Yeah, I know; I was going to say that. *(Laughter)* You know, it is funny. You know, these are six-week series. *(Laughter)* It's been a long past six weeks.

We looked first of all at the God who hears. And we know I think that this is going to be an interesting thing for us when we think about this particular text today. When we think about this passage—this text of Scripture, this book of 2 Thessalonians—one of the

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things that we often think is that this is a book about the end times. And certainly it is; there is a lot in this book about the end times. It's here that we learn about the tribulationary times. It's here that we learn about the antichrist. It's here that we learn about the apostasy. You know, those are big features of this book.

But I think that maybe the biggest feature of this book is prayer. And I actually mentioned that as we were starting out in our first talk together. And that was in “The God Who Hears.” I said to you then that we were going to move into the tribulation, and that we're going to look at the man of lawlessness. We're going to look at how Paul encourages us to stand firm in the Christian faith.

But then if you notice where we are today, we move back to his admonition to “*pray for us.*” And so we're moving back into this region where we're dealing with a prayer hearing God. And so we're looking at 2 Thessalonians chapter 3 and verses 1-6 today. So let me read those words, and then I'll say a little bit more about them.

“Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as has happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.

And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. “May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God, to the steadfastness of Christ.”

There's a lot there—a lot there by way of encouragement. But there's really a lot there when you think about some of the antitheses that he puts in front of us. So let's just look at some of those things today. And here's the outline that I want us to follow as we do. I want us to think about *the prompt to pray* that is in the text. I want us to think about *the objective of prayer*. Then I want us to think about *the confidence that we have in prayer*.

So those are the things that I want us to look at. But as we do I want us to think first of all about some introductory points.

When you think about chapter 2 you really come in some ways to the end of the whole eschatological, the whole end times aspect of the letter. And there's a sense in which we find ourselves saying that's what we needed from that letter; we need to know about the end. It is interesting when you pick up with verse 7 of chapter 3, because verse 7 of chapter 3 sort of leaves the end behind in one sense, and it takes up idleness. And you think to yourself after reading a letter that was so preoccupied with the end, why in the world would Paul take up this topic now? And I think there's a fittedness to what he's saying. And I actually think it's quite striking when you start to study verse 7 and following.

But you do come to the end. And when you come to the end you come to that point in the letter where you begin to see that the end times is not necessarily the focal point. But the structure of the letter is really about prayer. Let me show you.

So in 1:3 he says, “*We ought always to give thanks.*” And then in 2:13: “*But we ought always to give thanks.*” In 2:16 and 17: “*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ,*” and there's this prayer. And then in chapter 3: “*Finally, brothers, pray for us.*” And so there are these multiple references that we find in 2 Thessalonians to pray.

But I think all of this raises a question. And it raises a question, a very simple one, and it's simply this. If you were the author of this letter, what would be your counsel to these

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people? I want you to think about it for a minute. These people had been witnesses to some pretty severe times. Remember that there was a riot in their city; Acts 17 tells us about it. The letters themselves perhaps give us some insight into the severity of the riot. I think it's true that 1 Thessalonians 4 has to do with people who lost their lives in that riot. This was a pretty severe time. We call that a time of persecution.

And so here he is. And he's writing about the antichrist, about the tribulation and all those things. And we have a tendency to say to ourselves, “Well, those things are in the future.” But hopefully what I have been able to demonstrate to you is that the time of the antichrist is reoccurring, because the spirit of the antichrist is in every age. And so whether it be in the '50s when 2 Thessalonians was written, and they felt that the spirit of the antichrist was among them, or whether it be in the '90s when John writes that many antichrists have already come—and in fact the spirit of antichrist is among us—no matter what time you're in it feels as if the end is coming and that the end is near.

But that's really not the focus of the letter in one sense. In other words, I'm trying to get to that by asking you. If you were the authors of this letter what would you say? Or what would you sprinkle throughout the letter to try to make your point? For instance, maybe you might say something like “Get as much ammunition as you can,” right? Or maybe you would say, “Stockpile food.” Or maybe you would say, “Develop networks so that when crisis comes there will be a network of people that can meet needs.”

But it's interesting what Paul sprinkles throughout this section of the letter. Throughout he encourages them to pray, because he actually believes that God is a prayer hearing God.

Now I think every one of us would say amen to that. God is a prayer hearing God. The trouble is that I'm not always sure, in the practical way in which we live our lives, that we demonstrate our belief in that. And I think that's something that we need to take to heart. And I want to challenge you a little bit today about it. We need to become men of prayer. And we need to do that not because it's what our wives want us to do, or that it's what we ought to do because somebody has goaded us into that. But it's what we ought to do because God reminds us through his apostle Paul that prayer is what we ought to do because God is a prayer hearing God, and prayer does matter.

And I want to talk to you about some of the things related to that, because sometimes it doesn't feel like prayer matters. Sometimes our theology relegates prayer to the region of not mattering. And I want us to explore those different things. But I want us to do that with you in the midst of a discussion because I realize that this is in some ways a challenging text. And so I want you to feel free to interact with me. Of course you do; I don't need to tell you that. *(Laughter)* But you have that invitation.

First of all let's think about the first point: *the prompt to pray*. Paul says, “*Finally, brothers, pray for us*”—2 Thessalonians 3:1. Now he actually goes on to tell them what they could pray for. But I think that we need to stop here for just a minute. And I think we need to stop and sort of assess where we are not just as individuals—certainly as individuals—but I think we need to stop and assess where we are as men—men in the church, churchmen. And I think we need to stop and assess where we are as a church today.

There's one problem that I think we face today that is really vital. I've been saying it and I'm going to say it another way. I don't think that when we start to think about the

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things that we ought to be doing because perhaps there may be a coming crisis in our own country, I don't think that there are probably many who are out of touch with politics today. I find it kind of funny that my daughter thinks of me as somebody who listens to politics. I never listened to politics before the COVID crisis; I never listened to any of those shows. I was not listening to any cultural political commentary; I couldn't have cared less.

When I preached, for instance, I didn't want people to know if I was a Republican or a Democrat. And I still to some extent very much do this. I want people to know that I'm a gospel minister.

However I do think that it's important for people to understand where the church stands on particular issues. I think that is important. And that sort of categorizes you. But I'm digressing at this point.

My point is that I think it's funny that my daughter thinks that I'm a political animal. I limit myself to thirty to forty minutes a day of reading or listening to any kind of political commentary. And I do that for a reason. I don't want my life to be inundated with politics. But my daughter thinks that I'm this political animal; it's amazing. But I think that has become my experience, and I don't think it's mine alone.

But I say that because I think there's a failure in our lives for us to be known for prayer. For instance I would much rather have it that my daughter would say to me, “Dad, you pray way too much.” And yet she's not saying that. She's saying, “You listen to politics way too much.”

Now I know that she's not seeing me pray. And I also know that she hates politics. And so ten minutes of politics is way too much politics for her; I get it. But I still think that we're prayer failures. I think that we need to acknowledge that and face up to it. Can I say it this way? Surely I can because it's the fact of the matter. I think we all need to get better at our prayer life. And I think that's just a part of discipleship; it's just a part of growing in grace.

I'll tell you what the survey polls say; it's an interesting thing. The Evangelical Alliance asked the question. “*Do you regularly*”—which means daily—“*read the Bible and pray?*”

Now I'm going to give you the answer to that. And the answer is in some ways not surprising, and in some ways it is. The answer to that is that 90% of people read their Bibles and that 30% pray daily.

Now I'm not so much concerned with this particular poll. But the reason I find this poll interesting is because I find this consistent with my own pastoral experience. For instance when I talk to people, whether within my congregation or pastors outside of my congregation,--pastors in other churches, pastors in other denominations,--and I did ask at one point because I was really concerned with what I was hearing when I would go on shepherding visits. And I was trying to go on shepherding visits in my congregation. I try to get formally into everybody's house one time a year. And then there are all sorts of informal visits.

But what I found was that this was consistent with this statistic. I found that most of my congregation read their Bibles. But I found that fewer—far fewer—actually prayed. And I was appreciative of the honesty. They would say, “We read the Bible. And

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sometimes we listen to the Bible. We have an app that reads us the Bible,” and so on. “But the fact is that we pray little.”

Now it wasn't that they didn't pray at all. You know, they would pray with the kids before the kids went to bed. Perhaps they would pray before meals. But there wasn't a time where they locked themselves in their closets and prayed, and really devoted themselves to prayer and to meditating upon the Word and asking how that could inform prayers, and so on.

Now I know that. And I want you to know that when I say “prayer failures” that that's overstating the case. But what I am talking about is that I'm talking about a significant failure to pray and to set aside time to pray, not just individually but corporately in the life of the church today. I'm going to stop and let you throw anything that you want to throw in. Maybe you want to respond to this before I go on too much further. Yes?

Gary Craig: I just wanted to say that I hear a lot of people say things like “I pray so that God can change my mind, not so that I can change God's mind,” meaning that they don't think they can change God's plans. I think it comes from the idea of immutability. They look in the Bible, and that's a lot of what people are praying for; they're praying for God to do things. And I think their idea of God is just too small. I think God sees the end from the beginning. He can appeal back into eternity. He can do things based on what we pray for today because He transcends time.

Jeff: So I'm going to shake my head and nod and awaken because we're going to get to that, we are; we're going to get to that very thing. Can I put it this way? What about the more experiential end of this whole thing? For instance, of the 30% 18% had no fixed time of prayer. That's kind of what I'm talking about. And 60% pray on the move.

Now I know that for many people, at least for sixty people in this survey, praying on the move would be considered praying in their closets. And what I'm talking about is that the closet is the car. But thank you; I appreciate that, because it gives me something. I get it, and I don't want to discourage you from praying in your car. But I've prayed in my car and I know what that experience is like. (*Laughter*) And it's not a prayer closet. It is prayer and genuinely so: I don't mean to minimize that. But I think sometimes that prayer in the car is more of a stream of consciousness.

And maybe this is just autobiographical and not biographical for you. But I have a tendency to think—and I'll first-person it—that when I'm in the car praying it's more like talking with a buddy who is not responding back to me. And I'm not really giving it much thought.

I'll give you this, and maybe it does or doesn't resonate with you. But for instance, when I have particularly dry times in my prayer life, one of the practices I enlist to help me get out of that dry time is that I keep a notebook. And that notebook goes through the Psalms. So what I do is, I read a Psalm. And the first thing I do is that I outline the Psalm. And then in outlining the Psalm I then secondly ask: What's the main teaching of this Psalm? Could I distill it? Could I get down to something brass tacks about this Psalm? If the Psalm is too big I divide it, and so on.

And then what I do is, I take that brass tacks answer. And I use that to guide every prayer that I pray for family, for church, for you men, for the world—that sort of thing, right? So that brass tacks becomes the guide for all my prayers. So I don't have to think about what to pray. I don't have to worry about being repetitive—saying the same things

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over and over and knowing that they’re coming from a dry spirit. With the Psalm I’ve meditated on God’s word. That Word has given me something fresh to guide my prayers, and then I just apply it to my prayer life.

When I’m dry that really works for me. Now when I pray in the car it looks a lot different from that. And so from my experience praying on the move has not always been as deep, as moving, as helpful, as beneficial to me as finding a prayer closet. Do you have something that may be experiential that you want to work with at this point?

Don Bishop: Well, when do we pray the most? It’s when we’re under pressure, under problems.

Jeff: Yes.

Don: A current example is when the (Buffalo) Bill’s player got hurt.

Jeff: Yes; that’s right.

Don: There was a video I saw of a whole section of the stadium reciting the Lord’s Prayer.

Jeff: Yeah.

Don: Even announcers were praying.

Jeff: Yeah.

Don: And our problem is that we have it too good.

Jeff: Well you know, that’s something I think we do need to ask ourselves, right? When are the times that we’re praying? Here’s something else. I wonder if we have an appetite for prayer. I love Martin Luther. I oftentimes wonder if Martin Luther and I would have been friends. He was so different and eccentric; I don’t think he would have liked me. *(Laughter)* So it’s good that we’re separated by many hundreds of years. *(Laughter)* But you know, this is a guy who had an appetite for prayer, okay? And you see it in the way that he writes about prayer. He has a little book, about 30-some pages, on how to pray. And for me it’s still probably the best book I’ve ever read on how to pray, because you know the stuff you read about Martin Luther. He got up three hours early to pray because he was so busy. That’s really not the caricature that you find in the book on how to pray. What he says in the book is that if you have ten minutes, take it. Take your Bible and your confessions, or whatever you take, and go into a room and pray. And make those ten minutes count. If you have more than that, take it. But take what you have.

And then he talks to you, for instance, about how to pray through the Lord’s Prayer, or even how to take the Apostles’ Creed and make that a prayer. And it’s just fantastic stuff! But it shows me that this guy has an appetite for prayer that I long for.

For instance, you know, when his father died observers said that he took his Psalter into his room and he disappeared all day. And there he just wrestled with God.

When he was hiding away from the emperor, remember when Frederic the Wise had to kidnap him because the emperor was seeking his life, and they took him away and put him in a castle? And that’s where he translated the Bible. But while he was translating the Bible he was wrestling with God. And his physician went to the castle where he was staying, into the room in particular where he was staying. And he found that Luther had written all sorts of sayings all over the wall. And they were just things that he needed to be reminded of, Scriptural things for the most part. But this doctor, this physician of his, transcribed them all from the wall. And there’s a little 20- or 30-page book that’s in the

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American edition of Luther’s works. And it’s just all these transcribed quotes that were on the wall. He was constantly preaching the gospel to himself. And he was constantly dragging himself before the Lord because he needed to be there. I think that’s the kind of appetite I have in mind, at least when I think about this kind of thing.

Mike: Jeff?

Jeff: Yes, please.

Mike: One of the things that comes to my mind when you say why the loss of appetite is that we’re affluent; we have too much. And we don’t act like we need anything; we work just fine without God. But mulling this over a little bit, what it comes down to is our priorities. And when you think about priorities, it’s easy to run through a long list of priorities, right?

Jeff: Right.

Mike: My wife, my family, my job. We rattle off our list of priorities. But on the practical side of it what do our priorities look like? If I’m watching my life all the time, what do my priorities really look like?

Jeff: Yeah. Yes, absolutely; for sure. Yes?

Don Rimbey: Paul says in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 that we are always *“to pray continually and to give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.”*

Jeff: Yeah.

Don: And so praying continually would include car time, would it not?

Jeff: Oh, absolutely.

Don: Paul didn’t have a car, that’s the only thing. *(Laughter)*

Jeff: Absolutely. *(Laughter)* And this car time would be in the midst of that; there’s no doubt. I mean, I think that you can find places in the Scriptures where that principle is represented well. For instance in the book of Nehemiah he’s the cup bearer, right? And so he prays right before he asks the king to give him permission to go back to Israel. And I’m sure that Daniel was praying in the lions’ den, which I’m sure looked a lot like running around in the pit for a little while.

But then there are places where Daniel goes into his room and shuts the door, prays, and so on. Yes?

Brave Man: How relevant is posture—standing, sitting, kneeling, etc.?

Jeff: Well you know, that’s a great question. And I think most people, most Protestants, have a tendency to say that prayer posture is irrelevant; just pray. And I guess that at its lowest common denominator I would say yes, just pray. But I think that you do find different postures in the Scriptures. And I think for instance that we know that posture has a bearing on conversations. All you have to do is watch your teenagers and their posture when you’re trying to have a serious conversation with them. You know. “Are you listening to me? Sit up!” And you know, posture enters into that. “Sit up! Are you listening to me?”

“Yes.”

“Listen to me with your eyes.” You know, that sort of thing, right? So I think posture is a factor. For instance, if I’m at home and I’m alone I would rather pray on my knees, right? And maybe you say, “That’s just your deal.” Well, I don’t know if it is my deal. I

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would rather not get on my knees because my knees hurt these days. You know you're getting old when you have a little garden path that you keep alongside of you.

Well, I think a variety of answers can be given about this particular point. But good theology can be twisted, and that's one of the answers that can be given. And this gets to what you were saying. I want you to think about this for just a minute. There's a simple syllogism here that I think is important for us to keep in mind. If God is omniscient, then He knows what I'm going to ask before I ask.

Now that's a simple syllogism and it's true. But here's our tendency. If God knows what I'm going to ask before I ask, then I don't need to pray. Now that's a simple syllogism, but it's wrong, right?

Brave Man: It's wrong because you don't ask?

Jeff: Yes. Think about election. And I'm not talking about the primaries or the Presidential elections. Think about election for just a minute. If you want to go to 2 Timothy, hold your place in 2 Timothy and then go to Ephesians 1.

So let me read from Ephesians 1 first. And this is what I mean by election. When I talk about the election of God this is what I mean. This is Ephesians 1:3: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us for adoption to Himself as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace with which He blessed us in the Beloved.”*

Now that's what I mean by election. I mean by election what Paul means in Romans 9. “Before the twins had done anything good or bad, Jacob He loved and Esau He hated.” Before the foundation of the world God chose some for Himself.

Go now to 2 Timothy chapter 2. And in 2 Timothy chapter 2 and in verse 10 Paul says this. He says, *“Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.”*

Now think about that. Here Paul is saying in one letter that he's affirming that before the foundation of the world God elects; God chooses us. And in a sense, out of the mass of fallen, sinful humanity He says, “This one I loved and this one I hated.” And “hated” means continued to hate because of Adam's sin being imputed to them. So out of the mass of humanity God elects.

And yet Paul doesn't say, “Well God knows who He elected before the foundation of the world. And therefore God is going to save them by whatever means He chooses. So I don't need to bust my butt trying to get around the world so that people will be saved.” That's not what he says at all. What he says is, *“I endure everything for the sake of the elect.”*

Now the question is what is everything? And let's just refresh our memories here for a minute. Let's go just for a minute to 2 Corinthians chapter 11. And if you want me to just read this that's fine. But if you want to go there that's fine too. Listen to what the “everything” is.

He's challenging the super apostles that are in Corinth at this point. He's saying to them, *“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one. (I am talking like a madman.) With far greater labors.”* Listen to this; here is the *“everything for the sake of*

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the elect”: “far more imprisonments, with countless beatings and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I was adrift at sea: on frequent journeys; in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And apart from these other things there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches.”

Well you know, when I think about “*I endure everything for the sake of the elect*,” that’s what I think of. And so Paul is not working with the syllogism that God knows, therefore I don’t care. He’s working from the syllogism that God knows, and that motivates me to uncover what He knows. How do I uncover the elect? By indiscriminately preaching the gospel and seeing who responds in faith. It’s by that that I know God’s will.

You know, when I apply that to prayer I think of the exact same terms and categories. I don’t say, “God knows and therefore why pray?” I say, “God knows, and let’s see what He does.” And I see what He knows by praying. So I think that’s one way in which our theology—good theology, the sovereignty of God and so on—can get in the way of serious prayer. Has that been your experience, Don?

Don Bishop: There again, your understanding and your theology is about how God works. (*Unclear*) It ignores the fact that God is sovereign, that He works through secondary means; He establishes means. And if you’re not doing what He commands us to do, then you’re the one who is missing out.

Jeff: Yes, and sometimes that’s not so obvious, is it? I think that sometimes the missing out doesn’t feel like missing out, unless we really stop and examine the situation and see and sometimes ask ourselves, “Have any prayers been answered lately that I prayed?”

And then sometimes—and this is how you know you’re in a dry spell—you think to yourself, look! I don’t know if I’ve been praying for so much lately, right? That kind of unveils a little bit about your state.

Gary: It’s sort of like saying that my wife knows that I love her, so why tell her that?

Jeff: Yeah.

Gary: That’s sort of how people act with God.

Jeff: You’re saying that’s bad, right?

Gary: Yes, it’s bad.

Jeff: Okay. (*Laughter*) Make a mental note of that, Paul. (*Laughter*) That’s right; that’s exactly right.

All right. Well, how about another reason? Another reason would be a lack of direction. I mentioned this to you before and I think it’s important. Prayer has sometimes been replaced by the casual conversation that we have with God. Have you ever noticed for instance that at the end of your prayer time—and I’m saying this autobiographically—have you ever noticed at the end of your prayer time that you feel better but you don’t know anything that you may have asked? It may be implicit, but do you know what I’m talking about? You say, “You know, God?” This has been my car experience. (I hope this

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recording is failing.) (*Laughter*) But anyway, you get into the car and you say this to yourself, and I say that. Sometimes you say it to yourself, almost like you’re doing therapy on yourself, “You know, God, I’m really struggling today. You know where I’m going; I’m going to x-y-z place. And So-and-So is going to be there. And You know how difficult that relationship is for me.” And you may say something like “I’m going to really need You to show up in a big way if I’m going to get through the day. You know how So-and-So works on me,” and blah-blah-blah.

And you kind of get to the end of that and you sort of wonder. Did I really bow before the God of heaven and earth and beseech Him for change in my own life so it doesn’t matter if So-and-So is going to be there, but that I am a different person when I show up? Am I asking for transforming grace to really have its way with me? Or am I just trying to give myself a little pep talk so that I can just get through this?

And I think that sometimes our prayers lack direction. And I think we’re going to see some of that direction come out of the text when we get through this. Right now we’re just talking about prayer prompts, trying to make you feel as guilty as I possibly can. But you know what I mean. But I do think that prayer has been replaced by casual conversation. Maybe you want to comment on that. You guys are pretty sly; you’re letting me expose myself today. (*Laughter*) Yes?

Brave Man: I don’t know, Jeff. I feel like I’m in this twelve-step program of being able to stand up and say, “Yes, I’m praying in the car and I’m going to be a prayer failure.”

Jeff: Yeah.

Brave Man: Because it was in a journey over the past three years, being able to understand what it is that I need to do to pray, to pray without ceasing and pray for my attitude towards God.

Jeff: Yeah.

Brave Man: And that’s where this group has led me in being able to say that praying, while moving for me, is important, because when I rode over the Sewickley Bridge I would look over at the trees that are on the side of those banks, how beautiful God’s creation is. And I can’t help but praise God, and just be thankful for what He has given. And he goes back to your point as well. I’ll pray for him; I’ll pray without ceasing for the Lord to fulfill His promise to come back to us.

Jeff: Yeah.

Brave Man: So I’m a prayer failure. But I appreciate this group of men helping me with these matters.

Jeff: Yes. It’s in 2 Thessalonians, but it’s also in Philippians. You know, Paul gives these triads that remind us to pray, to have a life full of prayer. It’s like you’re talking about when you cross the bridge, and you praise Him for who He is and what He has done. For instance in Philippians 1:3 he says, “*I thank my God always and in every prayer of mine, with joy.*” That’s an edited part of the verse. But in chapter 4 he flips all that around. And where he ends with joy he begins with “rejoice.” And then he goes on to prayer and then he talks about thanksgiving. So he talks about thanks and prayer and joy, and then joy and prayer and thanks. So it’s a triad that the whole letter is built around.

That same thing appears in 1 Thessalonians. And it does remind us that it’s like Paul to sort of give us the Christian life in triads like faith, hope and love, or thanks, joy and

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prayer. And when you think about the Christian life summarized in little pithy triads you can't help but see that I'm to give thanks in everything. I'm to pray without ceasing and to be joyful always no matter my circumstances because of the One in whom I live and move and have my being. So yes, absolutely.

Well, Spurgeon had a sermon called “True Prayer, True Power.” And again this is in keeping with having a target for our prayers. He preached it on August 12, 1860. He basically said, *“Praying without direction is like an archer praying with no target, or like a ship sailing with no direction.”*

And what he was trying to expose was some of the confused nature of prayer that we often experience. And yet I would say to you as we move to the end of this section that it's better to pray a confused prayer than no prayer at all. It's better to pray a casual, directionless prayer than not to pray. So it's not that I'm trying to say to you that we ought not to pray casual prayers. What I am saying to you is that casual prayers have their place, oftentimes on the go. But there is also a place for meditative closet-type prayer, where we're focused on the Lord.

We need to remember this. I think it's a pithy illustration, but it's a good one. It's like the little boy who picks flowers for his mother. And you know, they've got weeds in them and they've got flowers in them, maybe a little poison ivy. And the dad takes the flowers and he pulls the poison ivy and the weeds out. And he arranges them a little bit, and he gives them to his son to give to his mom.

And that's the way Jesus deals with us, right? He takes our confused prayers and He sanctifies them before they are offered to the Father. That is, our prayers come to the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ as everything does, because He is our Mediator.

Richard Sibbs was an old Puritan. He said, *“God can pick sense out of a confused prayer.”* So all of this is to say that we ought to have some direction in our prayers. There ought to be both prayer on the move and prayer in the closet. There ought to be these things working in tandem: prayer without ceasing and prayer that is more meditative, and so on.

So the question that we really have to ask ourselves is this. And here's where it gets to the crux. Do we really believe in the power of prayer? Do I really believe that God answers prayer and that prayer is powerful?

Let me put it like this. Tim Keller wrote a book on prayer, and he had an illustration in that book. His wife actually had the illustration and I think it's a powerful one.

He and his wife had decided a long time ago that they were going to pray at night together. And his wife said to him, “You know, Tim, we're failing at our own plan; we're not praying every night.”

And apparently he gave some excuse as to why they were hitting and missing, and so on. And she said to him, “Tim, let me ask you a question. If the doctor gave us both a pill and said, ‘You guys are suffering from the same problem. You need to take this pill. And if you miss taking this pill one night, you're going to die.’” She said, “Would we ensure that we took that pill every night?” And obviously the answer is yes; you would ensure that you are going to take the pill.

Now here's the beautiful thing about that. The beautiful thing about that is that our life does not depend on us taking the pill of prayer. Our life depends on Christ who

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swallowed that pill for us, right? I’ll use that analogy. So the beautiful thing about it is that my life does not depend on my works; it depends on Christ’s work applied to me.

However, the illustration is a good one. The illustration is a good one because it does sort of ask us about our own level or sense of importance regarding prayer. In other words, how important is prayer? And I think it really boils down to the question: Do we believe that prayer is powerful and has the ability to change things?

Do you remember the angel when Peter was in prison? They were praying for his release. Rhoda goes to the door when he actually knocks at the door. She shuts the door and says, “Peter is at the door!” And you want to say, “Why don’t you invite him in?” And they’re all going, “No, it’s not really Peter; it’s his angel.” It’s a funny story when you think about the power of prayer.

But Thomas Watson said, *“The angel fetched Peter out of prison. But it was prayer that fetched the angel.”* And you know, that’s powerful when you think about it! Again, it just drives us back to the idea that we ought to be prompted to pray because there is power in prayer.

Maybe one more thing and then we’ll wrap up today. How should we pray? I think this is really important, especially when we think about what prompts us to pray. When you think about prayer in the Old Testament you think about Isaiah 62. Isaiah 62:6 says, *“I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem. They will never be silent.”*

So maybe we should go here for just a couple of minutes: Isaiah 62. Take a look at this really quickly; it’s really important.

*““On your walls, O Jerusalem,
I have set watchmen.
All the day and all the night they shall never be silent.
You who put the LORD in remembrance,
Take no rest and give Him no rest until He establishes Jerusalem
And Makes it a praise in the earth.”*

Now go back to Isaiah 56:10 for a minute. In 56:10 look at what he says. He says:
*“His watchmen are blind;
They are without knowledge.
They are all silent dogs;
They cannot bark.”*

What is he saying? Well think about it this way. These watchmen in Isaiah 62 are those who are set on the bulwarks of Jerusalem. And they are given the promises of God. And they pray the promises of God, and they give God no rest until He answers the promise.

But here he’s describing the watchmen on the wall as silent dogs who can’t bark. In other words, these watchmen who were to be crying out the promises and “giving Me no rest until I answer the promises” are silent.

And then 52:8. In Isaiah 52:8 this is interesting.

*“The voice of the watchmen:
They lift up their voice;
Together they sing for joy,
For eye to eye they see
The return of the LORD to Zion.”*

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Here is a picture. The watchmen actually rejoice, because what they’ve been praying for has come to pass. And we see that text quoted in the New Testament with the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. So the picture of prayer in the Old Testament is really wonderful in that it instructs us how to pray.

If you don’t know what to pray for, if you have no direction in your prayer, if your prayers are confused, then find some promises of God in the Scripture and pray them. The Puritans were great at this sort of thing.

What do I mean? I’m not talking about sort of taking Scripture, ripping it out of context and saying, “This is a promise for me.” I think that’s foolhardy. I think it sets you up for failure and I think it sets you up for a sense of real depression, because you’re praying for things that God has not promised you.

What kinds of things has God promised you? Well let me give you an illustration of what the Puritans might have said. Matthew chapter 1 verse 21. The Puritans said this. This is the birth announcement of Christ. *“For she will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”*

Now we have a tendency to think about Christ either on the cross or at the consummation of all things. But the Puritans said that Jesus saves us from our sins. And if He really saves us from our sins then He has the power to save you from that sin. So pray that Jesus, whose name is named that because He will save us from our sins, pray this promise: that He will save you from this besetting sin that you struggle with, or that particular sin.

That’s an illustration of how the Puritans saw Scripture as useful and living in their lives. And so pray the promises of God. I’ve given you some examples already, but let me give you a few more.

Psalms 110 is about the Lord Jesus and His reign. We ought to be praying for the reign of Christ. I gave you this one already: Matthew 1:21-25. But I think we’ll close there and we’ll wrap it up for now. Unless you have any final comments or questions, (and we’ll just take one or two if you do); if not, we’ll pray. So just bring that outline back the next time and we’ll try to finish it in our next session.

Father, thank You for this day and for the time You’ve given to us. Father, thank You for the gift of prayer. Lord, we know that we don’t pray as we ought. We know that oftentimes our prayers are lacking direction and are sometimes confused. But Lord, we pray that we would be men of prayer. We pray that we would lift up our concerns to You. We pray, Father, that we would plead Your promises. And we pray, Father, that You would answer, not necessarily for our sakes, but that You might have the glory in it all. And Lord, we pray that You will bless and magnify Yourself in all the earth. And we ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen. (*Applause*)