



Praying with Purpose

God's Providence, Our Prayers (Part 1)

Schedule/Topics

Apr 15 – God's Providence, Our Prayers (Part 1)

Apr 22 – God's Providence, Our Prayers (Part 2)

Apr 29 – Prayer for Maturity, Ephesians 1:15-20

May 6 – Prayer for Strength, Ephesians 3:14-21

Setting the Stage: Observations on Prayer

- At its most basic level prayer is an expression of our dependence upon God.
- Our purpose in prayer is to glorify God by seeing him actively accomplish his will here on earth. God, not us, must be the focus of our prayers and it is his will and not just our own that we must long to see occur in our lives.
- Submission is an essential ingredient in Jesus' prayer life and should be in ours. This means, at least, accepting the answers God gives and that no answer is itself an answer.
- In our prayers we should discern how God is working in and through circumstances rather than merely expect God to change them.
- Thankfulness for God's movement in others gives us opportunity to avoid self-absorption.
- God is just as interested in us as in what we want and he occasionally denies our requests so that his glory and our good are optimal.

God's Providence, Our Prayers

Exactly how do our prayers intersect with God's meticulous sovereignty? In what sense does God respond to prayer when his purposes are changeless? Why pray if God is all-wise and all-knowing? Similarly, if God has already determined the end from the beginning and the outcome of every event, do our prayers really influence God to act in ways that he otherwise would not? Consider:

Divine providence is like a blueprint or master plan involving a stream of dynamically related events through which God brings about precisely what he intends and by which he governs the world (see Psalm 33:10-11; 115:3; Proverbs 5:21; 16:1-4, 9, 33; Daniel 4:34-35; Isaiah 14:24-27; 46:9-11; Acts 4:27-28).

1. **Prayer**, as one element in God's blueprint, is an expression of our trust and reliance upon God's providence and, therefore, **is a means God uses to affect change** for accomplishing his will.
2. **Prayer is a condition for not the cause of God acting** in the world. God does respond to the prayers of his people, but not because he is compelled to do so but because he has chosen to do so (see Genesis 18:22-33; 21:17; 30:17; Exodus 32:14; 1 Chronicles 14:14; Daniel 10:12; Matthew 7:7-11; Acts 4:29-31; 12:5-11). Consider:

As Chief Architect and Ruler over all, God's providential control is seen in governing the affairs of nations (Job 12:23; Ezra 1:1; 6:22; Psalms 22:28; 33:14-15; Proverbs 21:1; Acts 17:26). Even in the midst of evil, God redirects the results of sinful human choices toward his ultimate purposes, whether his purposes are for blessing, discipline, or judgment (Genesis 37:28; 45:5; 50:20; 2 Kings 19:25; Isaiah 10:5, 12; 13:17; Jeremiah 25:9, 12; Ezra 14:9; Habakkuk 1:5-12; Romans 8:28-29; Ephesians 1:11). As sovereign King he has an overall "blueprint," known only to him, in which he has already engineered every effect from every cause and every consequence from every condition. In his perfect wisdom and almighty power, God's firm and sure resolve is to bring about the precise goal he intends for his creation. Ultimately, everything that comes to pass is what he has purposed and everything he has purposed comes to pass. And prayer, serving as a link in the chain of God's meticulous provision, is an exciting opportunity for us to be actively involved in changing the world!



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3. Nevertheless, **God has set some parameters around answered prayer**, which include **praying in Jesus' name** (John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24). To pray in the name of Jesus is to enter the presence of God by the authority and reputation of Jesus rather than any individual authority (e.g., Acts 3:6; 4:7-10; 16:18; 1 Corinthians 5:4). It implies a surrendering of all personal authority and privilege and a complete submission to the Lord Jesus' authority over all. Therefore, humility and dependence are necessary prerequisites to effective prayer (2 Chronicles 7:14; James 5:16; 1 Peter 5:6-7).
4. Another parameter is **praying according to God's will** (Matthew 6:10; 26:39; 1 John 5:14-15). The fact that God knows in advance what we need before we ask (Matthew 6:8) suggests God's provision is not only in the answers he provides, but also in the prayers we pray. Prayer is not only about us, it is for us and is God's gift to us.

Like a conductor and composer, God has orchestrated each note and rhythm in the universe to perform his perfect composition of history. The motif repeated in every refrain includes the prayers of the saints that are instrumental in bringing the grand finale to a climax when the chorus will one day sing:

*"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"
— Revelation 5:13*

Next Week *God's Providence, Our Prayers (Part 2)*



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God's Providence, Our Prayers (Part 2)

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Thinking about God's providence and our prayers

Often, we think certain things will happen *because* we pray and, reciprocally, will not happen if we do not pray. We suppose there is a kind of cause-effect relationship between our prayers and God's answers. After all, it does appear that our prayers trigger or cause God's answers. But do they? Are these assumptions correct? Consider:

If I claim "God answered my prayers **because I (or others) prayed,**" this is true only in the sense that my prayers were instrumental; not because they are causal. For example, we are saved *by* our faith, not *because of* our faith. Prayer may be a condition for God's answers, but it is not the cause of them.

In no way, therefore, does prayer coerce or manipulate God into doing something he has not already determined to do. Therefore, in the strictest sense, our prayers do not cause God to do anything. The will of God is accomplished by our prayers, not because of them.

Exactly how do our prayers intersect with God's sovereignty?

- If God is meticulously sovereign over every detail in the universe, then he ordains certain ends and specific means to accomplish those ends. After all, God can only guarantee those outcomes where he can also ensure the means to achieve them. In some cases, prayer is God's means for bringing about those circumstances that otherwise would not have occurred.
- Prayer is not a way of helping God decide between different courses of action, but the instrument by which God's already settled decree affects our world. Some things God has purposed to accomplish despite human involvement while other things he has chosen to accomplish through human involvement, such as prayer. Just as God has provided labor as a means of supplying our material needs, so too God has provided prayer as a means of supplying our spiritual needs (John Calvin).
- Consequently, God's providence does not relieve us of the responsibility to pray. In fact, if prayer is a link in the sequence of events that God has ordained to bring about his will on earth, then we're not merely responsible to pray but highly privileged!
- Prayer, therefore, is God actively involving his followers in the process of advancing his kingdom in the hearts of men and women around the globe. Prayer is God's invitation to us to join him in changing the world! Prayer is the divine channel through which God's free, predetermined favor should descend. Prayer does change things in the world, but it does not change God's purposes for the world.

"Prayers are useful in obtaining those favours which He foresaw He would bestow on those who should pray for them"— Augustine, *City of God*.



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- The will of God is never frustrated by our prayerlessness, yet our prayerlessness can be an instrument of discipline in God's hand (see Joshua 9:14).
- When we pray according to God's revealed will we can be sure God will answer positively.

"And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him." (1 John 5:14-15)

Here the condition is asking according to God's will. We must want what God wants when we pray. Implicitly John is telling us that we don't always know what God wants, so praying according to His will demonstrates our total dependency upon Him. Other conditions for answered prayer include obedience (1 John 3:22), abiding in Jesus' words (John 15:7), praying in Jesus' name (John 14:14), and purity from sin (Is. 59:2; Ps. 66:18-19; Jn. 9:31).

When biblical conditions are met, we can be assured of not only being heard but receiving answers. Therefore, believers should pray with expectancy (Mk. 11:24; Heb. 4:16).

- That God already knows what we need before we ask him is no hindrance to our prayers. God's foreknowledge makes it possible for him to answer our prayers even before we pray (Isaiah 65:24). The certainty of the future, though determined by God, comes about through the free agency of human choices, including our prayers. Some of what God has determined to do he has chosen to do in response to our prayers.

The Privilege of Prayer

Since God has ordained the means as well as the ends to accomplish all and only what he intends for the universe, we have every incentive to be on our knees and gladly join him in changing the world for his glory by our prayers. Such privilege we have!

Next Week Prayer for Maturity, Ephesians 1:15-20

Recommended resources on prayer:

Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World by Terrance Tiessen

A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers by D. A. Carson

Prayer in the New Testament by Oscar Cullman

The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions by Arthur Bennett

Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God by Dallas Willard

Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home by Richard Foster

Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer by Gary Millar

The Soul of Prayer by P. T. Forsyth



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Prayer for Maturity, Ephesians 1:15-20

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Prayer of Praise for God’s Redemptive Plan (Eph. 1:15-16)

- “For this reason” most likely refers to all that God has done in graciously choosing to save us (Eph 1:3-14). Whereas Eph. 1:3-14 is Paul’s praise to God for his extraordinary call of salvation, Eph. 1:15-20 is a prayer to God for continued growth in salvation.
- Faith in the Lord Jesus necessarily expresses itself in concrete ways (“love for all the saints”).
- When God does a tremendous work in our personal lives we don’t hesitate to give thanks to him. So too we should give thanks for his work in the lives of others (see also 1 Thess. 1:2).

The Details of Paul’s Prayer (1:17-20)

There are essentially two requests. I propose it is here where authentic Christian maturity begins, for these requests are at the heart of living as God’s chosen family.

1. **Paul prays that we might know God better.** Of all the things Paul could have prayed for, this is number one! This is not generic knowledge but intimate, personal knowledge of God. Specifically, Paul asks God to give us “wisdom and revelation.”
 - ✓ This is likely two separate things but still one idea, mediated by God’s Spirit in us: 1) “wisdom” is practical living within the revealed will of God and 2) “revelation” is not necessarily additional information, but special insight into what is already known.
 - ✓ “Wisdom” and “revelation” are most likely the product of God’s Spirit, hence the NIV 2011 and ESV (contra NASB 1995, NRSV, et al.). Thus, “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation” could be translated “The Spirit’s wisdom and revelation” (as in “the love of God” could be “God’s love”).
 - ✓ An implicit assumption here is that, unless God by his Spirit gives wisdom and revelation, it’s impossible to know him better. We come to God not only on his terms by his means. The same Spirit who seals us in salvation (1:13) is continually needed to light our way as we live out our salvation.

“It is possible one could explain the whole of Scripture and not have spiritual understanding (1 Cor. 13:2). Doctrinal knowledge is no guarantee of spiritual insight. Being informed by the Bible is no substitute for being led by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s illumination provides the means for viewing all of life from heaven’s angle; a glimpse from God’s perspective. This can only come from the One who ‘searches all things, even the deep things of God’ because ‘no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God’ (1 Cor. 2:10-11). The Holy Spirit is as vital to spiritual understanding of God as the sun is to the light of day.”

2. **Paul prays that God’s Spirit will illuminate us** in: a) our heavenly hope, b) our eternal wealth, and c) our unimaginable power to live the life to which God has called us. Paul prays that we would have special insight into...
 - a. **The hope of our calling** — the goal of our salvation is to share in God’s glory (Col. 3:4; 1 Jn. 3:2-3). It is expectant anticipation of being “holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:27). This is not empty hope, wishful thinking, or blind optimism. It is a confident belief in the faithfulness of God who finishes



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Prayer for Maturity, Ephesians 1:15-20

what he begins (Rom. 4:19-21; Philip. 1:6). Our subjective hope is rooted in the objective reality of God's faithfulness (Rom. 5:2). Our future is guaranteed and secure!

- b. **The wealth of our inheritance** — note it is God's inheritance given to us. It is because we are chosen that we've been given a royal inheritance (1 Pt. 2:5, 9-10). Because of our position in Christ by faith we can embrace our new identity and the inheritance that comes with it (Gal. 2:20; 2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 3:3) and the supreme significance that we have in God's sight (1 Jn. 3:1)!
- c. **The incredible greatness of God's power** — The same power that defeated death and sin is unleashed in our lives to live for God. And this power is realized through prayer! (More on this next week when we address Eph. 3:16.)

So What?

- For what do you normally pray? Of all the things you pray for, where does the request "to know God better" fall in your priorities?
- If heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents (Lk. 15:10), should we do any less? When is the last time you thanked God for the salvation of others?
- Since we're asking God to help us know him better, then it is reasonable that he is the one who provides the means for us to do so. Besides prayer, what other ways do we grow in our knowledge of God?
- Only the Spirit of God reveals God (1 Cor. 2:9-16). We can memorize the entire Bible and not gain this type of knowledge. It is the work of the Spirit to reveal intimate knowledge of God to us (2 Cor. 4:6) and we must pray for it, as it comes in no other way. How might this change or enhance your prayer life?
- Given that Paul references God as Trinity in Eph. 1:17, do you have in mind the Triune God when praying or do you typically address only one Person of the Trinity? How might you include the Triune God in your prayers?
- The same power that raised Christ from the dead and exalted him to the heavens is readily on display in our lives when we pray. How does this change your outlook about prayer?

*Breathe on me, Breath of God
Fill me with life anew;
That I may love what thou dost love
And do what thou wouldst do.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God
Till I am wholly thine;
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with thy fire divine.*

— Edwin Hatch, 1878

Next Week Prayer for Strength, Ephesians 3:14-21



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After expounding upon the mystery of God’s “eternal purpose” in creating one new family known as the Church (Eph. 2:11-3:13), Paul bursts into prayer. Essentially, there are two petitions here, and then one expression of praise.

Two Petitions

1) Paul prays that God strengthen us with power through his Spirit in our inner being (Eph. 3:16-17a).

This power is in us but not from us. It comes from God’s Spirit and enters into our inner being. The presence and person of Christ dwells in us through the Holy Spirit (cf., Rom. 8:9; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:22; Col 1:27). So, what does Paul mean by our “inner being?”

- Whatever our “inner being” means it must mean the same thing as our “hearts” in v. 17 (the same expression is found in 2 Cor. 4:16). Our “inner being” is the place of renewal and regeneration. It is that immaterial part of us that is born again and gradually grows in Christlikeness. It is the stage on which our character is played out and the source from which our lives are lived.
- So many of us long for financial security, better physical health, a stronger body, more hair, less fat, etc. Paul’s focus in this prayer is for God’s power to be on display in our character, our “inner being.” Imagine the growth we might realize if we paid half the attention to our interior lives as we do to our exterior!

The aim of Paul’s prayer is that “Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”

- The idea of “dwell” here means more than to take up residence. It’s possible to take up residence in a house without making it our home. Over time as we add our personal touch (paint, wallpaper, curtains, landscape, etc.), our home eventually reflects our character, our tastes. So too, Christ gradually but certainly renovates our inner being and makes our heart his home. His character becomes ours as he dwells in us by his Spirit (see esp. Eph. 2:19-22).
- Note that it is “through faith” and by prayer that Christ makes my heart his home. The way I come to know Christ (by faith) is the same way I grow in Christ.
- The source of this power is God’s “glorious riches;” the implication being that we do not have our own resources (Jn. 15:5). All that we bring to the table is faith; and that, too, is God’s gift to us (Eph. 2:8-9; Philip. 1:29; 1 Tim. 1:14; Heb. 12:2).

*Note: This is a Trinitarian prayer! Paul prays that **God the Father** would strengthen our inner being through **God the Spirit** so that **God the Son** would manifest his character in our lives.*

2) Paul prays that we have power to grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ’s love (Eph. 3:17b-19).

- “Rooted and established in love” involves the initial love poured out to us at salvation (Rom 5:5) and is the basis for our growth in Christ (2 Cor 5:14). After all, it is because of God’s eternal, overwhelming, and irresistible love that we not only begin a relationship with Christ but continue in it (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8; Eph. 1:4-5).



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Prayer for Strength, Ephesians 3:14-21

- This is not a prayer for us to love Christ more, but that we would better grasp or comprehend his love for us. It's possible the Ephesians have not fully appreciated Christ's love for them (sadly, history bears this out; see Rev 2:1-4).
- The dimensions of Christ's love are staggering! Although the terms Paul uses for Christ's love involve measurement ("wide and long and high and deep"), they are comprehensive in scope and scale. This a metaphorical way of saying Christ's love permeates everything coming into contact with it. Paul prays in effect that we comprehend ("grasp") the comprehensive love of Christ! This love "surpasses knowledge" and moves well beyond mere creedal confession!
- Although the love of Christ is profoundly personal (Gal. 2:20) and is sweeping in the full range of every conceivable dimension of time and space, it is not just a private, personal endeavor, but is to be enjoyed and expressed "together with all the saints" (Eph. 3:18), which comprise the Church.
- Why is it important to grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ's love? "That you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." Essentially, that you may be mature in your faith; that you may increasingly become all God intends. This is God's personal and corporate goal for his people (see Eph. 4:12-13). *To experience Christ's love is to experience a new life where forgiveness is natural not contrived, fellowship is precious not merely artificial, testimonies are alive and vibrant not stale and simply correct, and all our attitudes and actions are inspired by Christ's sacrificial love.*

One Praise

Reflecting on Christ's love causes Paul to turn from beseeching God to bestowing praise on him (Eph. 3:20-21).

- God is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine, not only because he's omnipotent (all-powerful), but more importantly because he's all good and generous. The implicit assumption here is not only that God is *able* but also *willing* to give us more than we ask. Jesus teaches that God longs to give good gifts to his children (Mt. 7:11). This is a tremendous incentive to pray!
- The ultimate goal toward which everything in this universe is moving is God's glory. Put differently, the universe does not revolve around us, but around the purpose of God's optimum grandeur and glory (see Eph. 1:3, 6, 14). And, it is "in the church" as the Body of Christ where God chooses to bring himself glory. We ARE the temple of the living God and the place where his fullness dwells and radiates his magnificence (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16)!

So What?

- Is God's glory the target and goal of your prayers?
- In one sitting, read through Paul's prayers and take note of the things he emphasized. See Rom. 1:8-10; 10:1; 15:5-6; 2 Cor. 13:7-9; Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Philippians 1:3-11; Col. 1:3-14; 1 Thess. 3:9-13; 2 Thess. 1:11-12. How do your prayers compare?
- How has Christ's love for you impacted your life since becoming a Christian? Consider memorizing and meditating upon Gal. 2:20 or Rom. 5:1-8.