

August 27, 2017  
National Presbyterian Church  
Ephesians: Powerful Prayers  
Ephesians 1:15-20, 3:13-19; 6: 10-19  
David A. Renwick

In the past couple of months we've been looking together at one of the shorter books in the Bible; The letter to the Ephesians (written by the greatest missionary in the early church, a man by the name of Paul). And we come today, to the last sermon in the series -- in which we want to think together about prayer -- a subject that Paul mentions in Ephesians on at least three occasions (Ephesians 1: 15-20; Ephesians 3:13, 16-19, and Ephesians 6: 10-11, 18-19).

For many people, the main issue in prayer is: "Whether or not God answers prayers." People pray or don't pray based on their belief that God does or doesn't answer their requests.

And this is important: -- There've been lots of people in Texas (and here in DC) praying before and after Hurricane Harvey asking God for safety for themselves and their families and for strength to rebuild -- and this is normal -- and I hope the answer to their prayers and our prayers is "Yes"!

BUT the fact is -- that the making of requests like this and the expectation of a favorable answer isn't really the "basis" of prayer at all! At least it's not step 1, but step 2! "Step 1" is far more important -- and to me, at least, and I think to Paul as well, far more fundamental.

Let me put it like this, the most fundamental reason for prayer is NOT whether or not we believe "God answers prayers," BUT, rather, the remarkable belief that the God of the universe is not just an impersonal force, but that God is personal and relational. A "some-one," not a "something." A "someone" who hears us and wants to hear us; in fact, longs for us to be in conversation with him!

And that's it! When I, for one, say "I believe in prayer," the most important thing I'm saying is that you and I can have an ongoing conversation with God the creator of the universe -- our Maker and Redeemer: a conversation just as real as any I might have with any of you. The kind of ongoing conversation or chat through which we establish a connection, a relationship with God that binds us together, and that contains within it the power to change us.

And this is not some super-spiritual way of thinking -- it's no different, in fact, from what happens frequently on a human level.

We meet other people; we begin to chat, we strike up a conversation, we tell each other what's going on in our lives, and ask them their opinions on all kinds of subjects or issues. We may not know where to begin so we talk about the weather or sports or our children, our grandchildren, and if we feel like taking a risk, we may even talk about politics! And it's through this "back and forth conversation," sometimes about nothing-much in particular, that we get to know one another and a friendship can begin -- and sometimes this friendship can be powerful and transformative for our whole lives!

There are some great examples of this in the Bible.

- A thousand years before Jesus, King Saul's son, Jonathan, struck up a friendship with the future king, David and because of the friendship was willing to abdicate his rights and hand over the throne to his friend! (1 Samuel 18)
- OR there's the story of a woman at a well in Samaria who enters a conversation with Jesus, they chat together: and she discovers that he knows everything about her sordid past -- and yet still loves her. (John 4)
- OR think of Jesus' friend, Andrew, who strikes up a conversation with a little boy and establishes trust: so the boy hands over his 5 loaves and 2 fish to Jesus who takes and uses them to feed a crowd of 1000's. (John 6)

Each of these stories is about change: powerful moments in which lives are changed! BUT they begin, not with requests or answers to prayer but with simple conversations that transform.

And that's what prayer is about first and fundamentally: The incredible gift of God in which The Maker of the Universe is humble enough to say,

*"Speak, and I'll listen; I want your friendship – now and forever. Want to chat? I can hear you now!"*

And it's only then, once the relationship has been established, that asking and getting make sense and become a natural part of the conversation

Or, to put it another way, if we begin asking for things too quickly from someone we barely know, before the relationship is solid, we might convey that all we want in our asking is to use the person for our purposes: to take what we can get from them, and then head on.

And all of us have probably felt this at some time: someone has used us in this way; maybe in a minor way, or maybe in a major way! And the friendship turns sour, and we say: "How did this happen? I thought we were friends."

But everything changes once a genuine relationship has been established. Once you know someone and their interests and skills and resources it becomes okay – in fact, natural – to use the conversation and the relationship to ask for things, or for advice or help of one kind or another. And the same is true with God. The initial purpose of prayer is not to get the answers we want from God but to connect with God, to build a relationship with God – a friendship -- that in and of itself is transformative – but that can certainly lead in time to "the big ask"!

**And this is what we see right off the bat when Paul prays in Ephesians:** the relationship precedes "asking." So that in his first prayer in Ephesians Paul doesn't ask for anything at all – his first prayer is not a request at all, but an opportunity to tell God how grateful he is for the Christians in Ephesus. It's a prayer of thanksgiving (1:16):

Since I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all God's people (the saints), I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

In fact, when you have a relationship with someone, very quickly you'll find a way to thank them for something. Nothing builds relationships – (with people or with God) more quickly than expressing gratitude – telling someone directly just how grateful we are for them.

Back in 2014 at Thanksgiving journalist Emma Green wrote a surprising article in *The Atlantic* about the fact that the very act of thanksgiving, the very impulse to give thanks

almost assumes the existence of a personal God, because it begs the question: “To whom are you thankful?”

She asks: Without the existence of someone out there, what’s the purpose?

And she points out that in 1863, in establishing the national Thanksgiving Holiday in the middle of the Civil War, Lincoln used the language of Christian faith – language about a God who is interested in our lives in his proclamation. This is what Lincoln said:

*The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties – which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come – other blessings have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften, even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God.*

So in Ephesians, Paul’s first prayer is one in which he builds his relationship with God by expressing thanks. (Is this where your prayers begins?)

Relationship precedes asking!

And even when the asking begins in Ephesians 1 and 3 Paul’s first requests or “asks,” are all about deepening our relationship with God – not for things. He prays that God would help the Christians in Ephesus to come to know God; to know how much God loves them; to know how much God wants their lives to be filled with his presence and power, both now and in the future

SO, in Ephesians 1 he writes:

I pray (I ASK!!) that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,

1. may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation – as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know
2. what is the hope to which he has called you,
3. what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and
4. what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe: the same great power God put to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead.

And then, in Ephesians 3 he writes:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory,

5. God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that
6. Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith,
7. as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

I pray that

8. you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth – yes – to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
9. so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

There are nine requests here!! But what it boils down to is this: (1) That Paul wants the Ephesians to Know God; and (2) to know that the God they know loves them and longs to empower them and transform them and fill them with his life and presence.

Psychiatrist Smiley Blanton once told a story re a man by the name of Gillespie who had a crippling sense of inferiority. When he came to Dr. Blanton for help -- Blanton probed deeply – and began to explore this man’s past, and discovered that, when he was 14 he had a math teacher who mocked him incessantly.

Whenever Gillespie was given a problem, the teacher would often say “Come on, come to the board and show us the solution to this problem.” And the teacher would know that Gillespie couldn’t do it, and that there would be this moment of awkwardness when Gillespie would give up. And then the teacher would tell him in front of the whole class that his head was empty and that there was nothing in his brain.

(PLUS, June 1991, pp.16-17)

And this message had been like poison in his soul for years affecting his whole view of himself and the way he lived his life. And what Paul is saying is that the asking part of prayer should first of all be for God to give us and others a relationship that is the exact opposite of this.

- Not a relationship in which we carry inside us a voice of a parent or teacher or employer or friend which says to us we’re no good!
- But one in which we carry inside us God’s voice telling us that we are loved and adored more than we can say, by a God who gave his life for us. And who wants us to know him.

When you make requests, for yourself or others – is this what you pray for? This is how Paul prays in Ephesians: It’s relationship first, and then “ask.” And even when it’s “ask” – it’s still relationship first!

So Paul builds his relationship with God by using prayer (1) to offer “Thanks” and then he prays (2) for the Ephesians that this relationship they have with God will grow and grow until it becomes transformative and finally in Ephesians Paul “uses” prayer (3) to ask for God’s Power, so that God and good would triumph over evil – (just as Jesus, by the way, tells us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer: to pray not only that God would “Deliver us from Evil,” but that “God’s kingdom would come, and will be done on earth as in heaven.”)

This is what Paul writes in Ephesians 6 (10-11, 18-19)

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.  
Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. Empowered and inspired by the Spirit, pray at all kinds of times, and in every kind of prayer and prayer request for all God’s people.  
Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

And in Chapter 3:13 he adds:

I pray that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.

In other words, for Paul, there’s a war on! And prayer is the communication channel that keeps the relationship with HQ open in the heat of battle so that we know what to do, and have the resources we need to fight the battle and win.

In March (15) last year, Loren Thompson wrote these words in Forbes Magazine:

The digital revolution has transformed America's Army. In the years since 9-11, Army ground and aviation units have acquired a host of new sensors and communications systems. Those units now train on the assumption they can run rings around any enemy when it comes to knowing what is happening in the fog of war, and using that knowledge to defeat them.

There's only one problem: in future wars, the Army is likely to face enemies far better equipped than it is to seize control of the electromagnetic spectrum and exploit it to tactical advantage.

In fact, the Army could quickly see all of its key targeting and communications systems shut down by enemy jammers. It might even lose access to GPS signals, which soldiers depend on to know where they and their allies are on the battlefield. GPS signals are not hard to jam, they're relatively weak, and our enemies know exactly how to do this.

It's scary enough to think of no GPS as I try to get around our city! It's far scarier to lose this vital channel of communication in war!

And Paul says: We need to think of ourselves as being at war with evil. And to think of prayer as the communication channel that we need to maintain our relationship with our Commanding Officer and HQ, to maintain access to God's power and wisdom and resources, in order to win the day.

Part of this battle with evil is intensely personal – it's a war against our own greed and envy and lust and anger and a host of other sins that can de-rail our lives. And part of this battle is intensely public – it's the battle against prejudice and hatred and injustice not just in ourselves but built into many of the structures and systems in every society, including ours.

And what Paul would say is this – that both in our private world and our public world one of our key assets in the fight against evil is prayer.

- Prayer for ourselves
- Prayer for our leaders
- Prayer for our nation
- Prayer for the church in general and for our church
- Prayer that evil would NOT prevail
- Prayer that we would be agents of God's reconciliation in our city and nation.

In fact – one of my prayers for our congregation is specifically that God would change the demographics of our congregation to reflect increasingly the city in which we live in age and race. And that in our living together as followers of Christ from many kinds of backgrounds, in our worshiping together as followers of Christ, in our serving together as followers of Christ, our very community itself would be a powerful witness to the reality and power of our relationship with God, and a healing presence in our fractured society.

This, of course, is the last thing the devil wants which perhaps means that in the battle against evil, that this should be one of the first things we pray for!

PRAYER! Powerful Prayer! How amazing that God is not a some THING -- but a some ONE who longs to hear us and longs to enter a relationship with us – in which we can chat – about anything and everything.

- Expressing our thanks (do you?)
- Asking that our relationship with him / relationship of others w/ him grows deeper (do you?)
- Asking too for the resources and power we need to defeat evil wherever we can: in ourselves and the world. (do you?)

Ephesians doesn't tell us everything we need to know about prayer. But it's a great place to start. And I have a sneaking suspicion, that if our prayers started there, then we'd see more answers to the "asking part of prayer," all over the place, than we can begin to imagine!

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2017 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/sermons>  
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800