

## MAKING THE CHRIST CONNECTIONS

### II. “Connected in Prayer”

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Colossians 1:9-14

#### INTRODUCTION

I want to thank all of you who went to Mexico with us on our mission trip. You see, many of you were on the mission trip and didn't know it. You were with us on the trip through your prayers. I know many of you took your role in prayer very seriously. We indeed experienced the fruit of those prayers. In fact I often heard comments from team members saying, “We can feel the prayers of the church.”

Maybe you wonder about that phrase we sometimes use, “feeling the prayers of others.” “Feeling” may not be the best word, since it isn't as much an emotion as a sense, a knowing that what we see happening is in answer to serious prayer. Let me describe a couple of ways that was evident to us. While we were engaged in our project in the little Mayan village of Sacabchen, we had almost no time to pray about what we were doing. O yes, we had team devotions each morning and brief prayers in the evening, but mainly we were just overwhelmed with doing what we'd come to do. Our day usually started around 6 a.m.— nine people using one bathroom and trying to grab something for breakfast. Late afternoons we had the Bible school for children. In between the concrete work and Bible school was preparation for the Bible school and recovery from our labor in the hot sun. We'd return to our home around 7 p.m. and begin making dinner. It was usually close to 9 p.m. when we were debriefing and ending with prayers of thanksgiving. Yet throughout the time, we were *very* conscious that God was doing something beautiful in it all. Some team members knew they were doing far more physical labor than their bodies were capable of— and with virtually no sore muscles or pain. Facing 90 kids each evening with three-fourths of us not able to communicate in their language was frightening— yet it flowed miraculously. Next week, Phylicia will tell you of the miracle of the little clinic that she offered.

You see, what was happening we knew could *only* be happening through prayer. Yet it was *way* out of proportion to the amount of praying we could do. We were just pretty much in a survival mode, doing what we'd determined to do. But, the blessing of the Lord was there at every turn. We know it was *your* prayers that were making it happen. I sometimes felt that, while we were the visible hands doing the work, it was the rest of the body that made it happen— for what can a hand do on its own?

One day, at the work site, Rev. Josue', a Mayan pastor, showed up wanting to meet me. You may recall that about one and a half years ago, our church bought him a computer through a portion of our church's tithe of the Elsie Greteman estate. We'd learned about pastor Josue' through the Freese family since John had stayed in his home several years ago while working with Inter Varsity in the Yucatan. Here this pastor had taken virtually an entire day to search us out when he heard we were there so he could meet us. As he and I talked together, he looked at me with

total sincerity and depth of feeling, and said, “I always keep you and your church in my prayers!” That comment stayed with me, and the Holy Spirit used it to stir my heart over the next few days.

Here is a Mayan pastor with plenty of his own prayer concerns among the several churches he serves, praying for me and you. The work we are doing here is helped and energized through his depth of love and prayer for us. Aren’t these invisible connections through prayer exciting? Doesn’t that make you want to deepen your prayer life?

This morning, we have the opportunity to sit at the feet of one of the greatest prayers of all time, and listen in on how he prays. Several times in Paul’s letters, he moves into prayer for those to whom he is writing. When Paul prays, it is good to sit up and take notice. His prayers form great models for us to learn more about how we should be praying. I hear it often as a pastor, “I’m praying, but I must be doing something wrong because I’m not getting any answers.” “Just how can my prayers be more effective?” is a question often on all our minds. While certainly all prayer is good, I think we all recognize some people are much better at it than others, and seem to see much more happening through prayer. This morning we can learn much from one of the masters, the apostle Paul.

As we continue in the second sermon on our series from Colossians, we’re looking at this prayer Paul prays for the Colossians in 1:9-14. It is on the bulletin insert so that you can keep it handy and perhaps make use of it in your prayers this week. As we read the Scripture together, notice the prayer has two great requests: first, to discover God’s will and second, the power to do it. That indeed needs to be the basis of all our prayers.

### **KNOWING GOD’S WILL**

I expect most of us begin our prayers more with telling God what we want or need— whether for ourselves or for another person for whom we are praying. This is not wrong. Our heavenly Father is concerned about our needs and desires. But prayer needs to move beyond that to discerning God’s will in everything.

Suppose you’re praying for healing for someone with cancer. Certainly God does intervene and heal, and that is our human desire always. But also, we know sometimes God uses such things in our lives, along with the uncertainty, the difficulties it brings to increase our dependence and trust in God— thus deepening our spiritual lives in ways nothing else could. So, should you pray for deliverance or development of the soul? Only God knows, right?

Of course, we all want to avoid suffering and all the difficulties in life. We want God to protect us and everyone around us from anything bad coming our way. At the same time, we’ve all faced what we thought was a disaster and found it drove us into the arms of God where we found growth in our spiritual lives we never could have known in any other way. As Romans 5:3-5 puts it,

*we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

So, if only good things happen to us, we'll be short-changed in the long-run. Phillips Brooks said it well when he wrote,

*Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger people! Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks.*

Now do you see why Paul's first request in this prayer is that the Colossians might be filled with the knowledge of God's will? What God wants must always be primary. And, since God loves us perfectly, and knows us perfectly, what could be better than His will? He knows what's best more than we do. Once we discover God's will and pray in accordance with it, our prayer is guaranteed an answer. That's what it means to pray in Jesus' name— according to His will. Names in the Bible were often significant, defining the person's nature. It is especially true with Jesus' name. To pray in His name is not just tacking on "in Jesus name" at the end of our prayers. It means our prayer is consistent with Jesus' nature, character, and will. When we get all that right, Jesus promises, "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it" (Jn. 14:14).

So, at the beginning of our prayer, our hearts need to be relinquished to God's will. But this isn't just a blind, "whatever you want Lord." God wants to reveal to our hearts what He is wanting to do. Then, when we understand, we can act as His agents, on His behalf. That is the secret behind Jesus miracles and teaching. He says,

*"I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."* (John 5:19)

Jesus knew the Father wanted to heal this person, or to deliver this one. The words He gave in teaching were ones that the Father had given Him to speak. He was the perfect extension of God's will into our world. That is also our calling— to be like Jesus in doing this— knowing what God wants and then doing it through His power.

Paul also gives us guidance in how we know God's will: *through all spiritual wisdom and understanding*. "Wisdom" has more to do with insight. "Understanding" with the application to our living. God has already revealed much of His will in the Bible. To ask God to "fill us with the knowledge of His will" and not seriously study the operations manual He's already given us is arrogant and presumptive. The Holy Spirit works through God's word, giving us insight and understanding about what God wants. His will can also be revealed to us in other ways, to be sure, but God's word is always primary and we must be careful students of it.

### **APPLYING GOD'S WILL**

This knowing God's will is not just so we can know, but has a purpose Paul lists in living "a life worthy of the Lord." What we know about God needs application in our lives so that the way we conduct ourselves brings honor to the name of Jesus. Unfortunately, there are those who know a lot about God— know the Bible so well they can ace Bible trivia quizzes— yet it doesn't seem to get translated into their living. We've all met grumpy, critical, angry Christians that have been an embarrassment to the name of Christ. Paul lists five specific things he's praying for— and I can't imagine a much better prayer list for each of us, once we understand God's will. 1) "Please Him" 2) "bearing fruit" 3) "growing in the knowledge of God" 4) "strengthened" with His power 5) "joyfully giving thanks."

**1. “Please him in every way.”** This means living our lives for God, not ourselves. Our tendency is to do what pleases us. If you pray this each day at the beginning, it is a good start. Think what it would mean to please Jesus in everything you do that day. Walk through your day in your imagination. What will make Jesus proud of you:

- § at breakfast, the way you eat and interact with the family;
- § on your drive to work;
- § at work with the problems that arise, with the people you deal with;
- § other activities through the day– shopping, phone calls, socializing.

In order to do this, we need to keep praying through the day, continuing to silently seek the Lord’s guidance in all we do. Cultivate a sensitivity to His presence so when we stray from the path, do something displeasing to Him like speak an unkind word, we’re immediately aware of it and can correct our course. As we do this, it is thrilling to begin finding little hints of His guidance in the things that cross our path– opportunities to show love, compassion; someone who needs an encouraging word; a chance to turn a negative, gossipy conversation toward good things. Maybe the delay or wait we are required to endure can be a chance for reflection and quiet prayer rather than frustration.

**2. “Bearing fruit in every good work.”** Our lives are meant to bless others through what God produces in them by His Spirit. Paul gives an excellent list of some of those fruits in Gal. 5:22-23. The list is on the banner here to the right of the cross: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are the fruits God produces in our lives when we are yielded to Him, and walking in obedience to Him. I often use that list to review my life in my morning devotions, praying that each of these wonderful fruits will be there that day to bless others. Isn’t that what our world needs. Your life should spread these gifts for others to enjoy. I hope you can think of people who seem to bear some of that fruit. Isn’t it a gift just to be around them and be blessed by their joy or kindness or the peace they exude?

The secret of bearing fruit is abiding in Jesus. Jesus makes it clear in his illustration of a grapevine and its branches:

*Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5)*

Fruit is a byproduct of being connected to the vine. The branch doesn’t do it– the life flowing from the main stem does it. So with us, as we walk with Jesus, cultivating a sensitivity to His Spirit in all we do, the fruit will be there.

**3. “Growing in the knowledge of God.”** Here I think The Message puts it well. *As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do your work.* Learning about God’s ways, observing how He does things teaches us what and how to go about our work. Jesus is of course the most perfect expression of God’s ways.

**4. “Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may**

**have great endurance and patience.”** Here is a petition that we might have the power from God to do His will in our lives. This is the wonderful, unique truth of our Christian faith. God doesn’t just tell us how to live, but He empowers us by His Spirit to actually do it. Do you realize that every other religion in the world is essentially a self-reform program, according to the rules they give? Only in Christianity do we have God coming to us in Jesus to give us the free gift of salvation and then empowering us by His Spirit so we can actually live and do what He wants—not in our strength, but in the strength He supplies. But we need to constantly be reminded of this. We don’t depend upon ourselves, but place our trust in Christ’s life within us.

This petition was certainly answered for us on the mission trip. As I mentioned, many of the team knew it was God’s strength that enabled them to do what they did—endurance in the physical tasks. Polly shared with you several weeks before we left on the mission trip all her fears and misgivings. The reason she went was she understood it to be the will of the Lord for her. So, out of obedience to that call, she went. In doing so, she experienced the Lord’s supernatural provision throughout the trip. She found His grace adequate for all she was afraid of. And, she did physical labor, lifting concrete blocks and shoveling sand for the concrete that she cannot do in her own strength. God gave her what she needed. And she glad she is glad she went.

**5. “Joyfully giving thanks to the Father.”** Our lives should be overflowing with thanksgiving. Paul then lists reasons for always being thankful and joyful, because of the Father

*who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints  
in the kingdom of light.*

*For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness  
and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,  
in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

Words of promise— an inheritance. And it is a description of the rescue mission Jesus undertook for us, breaking us free from the bondage of the darkness of this world and bringing us into the freedom and joy of His kingdom, forgiving all our sins.

## CONCLUSION

Wow! What a prayer. I encourage you to take this prayer and use it as a model for someone or something for whom you are praying. Pause reflectively at each phrase, asking for insight and guidance from the Lord as you pray. You’ll find your prayer entering into greater depths and find it far more exciting than our standard, “God bless John, and Mary, and provide for our needs....”

Also, be inspired by the constancy of Paul’s prayer: *since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you.* Keep on praying.

You probably remember the news coverage this last fall of 17-year-old Laura Hatch who disappeared after leaving a party in a Seattle suburb. No one knew she had lost control of her car and careened down a steep forested ravine. When she didn’t return that night, her parents contacted police and a search was begun. The Hatches were members of Creekside Covenant

Church in Redmond, and about 200 volunteers joined the search. While the whole church was certainly praying, one of the church members, Sha Nohr prayed with great intensity since her daughter was one of Laura's closest friends. Then, after a week, Sha had trouble sleeping. She kept having a recurring dream of a wooded area and heard the message, "Keep going, keep going." The following morning, Sha and her daughter drove along the road they thought Laura had taken, praying all the way. At one point, Sha said, she felt the urge to stop and climb over a concrete barrier and go 100 ft. down a densely vegetated embankment. There she found Laura's crumpled Toyota, with Laura alive, barely conscious in the back seat. The car could not be seen from the road. Laura, severely injured, had been trapped in the car for eight days. She will make a full recovery.

May we, like Paul, never stop praying, *asking God to  
fill you with the knowledge of his will  
through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*