

STANDING FIRM

II. “Transforming Power”

5-13-07
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1 Thess. 1:2-10

INTRODUCTION

How’s your prayer life? Is it generally something you look forward to with a sense of joy and anticipation? Or is it overlaid with a sense of duty? Do you feel like you should pray more? Well this morning, we have before us a model of prayer that I hope will inspire you and launch you into some new, exciting dimensions of prayer.

Almost all of Paul’s 13 letters in the New Testament begin with a prayer of thanksgiving for the recipients, right after his salutation. Most begin with “We [or I] thank God for you....” and, more often than not, “always” is included, so it is “I always thank God for you....” The Message begins our text with, *Every time we think of you, we thank God for you.* I don’t know about you, but that offers a challenge to my prayer life. He then goes on to detail some of what he is thankful for. In that, we catch a glimpse of the richness, depth, and significance of Paul’s prayer for the churches. Also, we are given a wonderful summary of the transforming power of God in salvation.

In our text, I hear a real challenge to move past our routine prayer lists where we run through our requests and concerns, sometimes without a lot of thought, one after another with a “God bless....” or “Lord be with...” In our text, Paul moves beyond the surface into discerning what is *really* going on and praying in harmony with God’s desires for the Thessalonians. Suddenly prayer becomes a lot more interesting, engaging our spirits, hearts, minds, and imaginations. Let’s look at how Paul says he is praying for these new converts in Thessalonica.

TEXT

TIME FOR PRAYER

This kind of prayer requires time— an extended block of time before the Lord, reflecting on what’s really going on, discerning what the Lord is up to. A number of years ago, I read a testimony by Dr. Ralph L. Byron, Jr., that impacted my life and I’ve often thought of it through the years. When he was a surgical-resident, training in Berkeley, he became concerned that his life didn’t show much power or impact for Christ. His prayer life amounted to a brief bedtime prayer. I like the way Dr. Byron expresses his struggle with getting serious about time spent with the Lord. He writes:

I began to study this ailing area of my life. First of all, how much time did I spend each day in prayer? Fifteen minutes? Ten? I decided that I should know. I pulled out my stop watch and timed myself. The total prayer, with a few P.S.’s lasted 40 seconds.

Could this be the answer to the vagueness and dryness of my life as a Christian? I went to the library and took out every book I could find about men for whom God had been a pulsing, living reality— biographies of Martin Luther, John Wesley, D.L. Moody, John Calvin and

others. I discovered that every one of those men had prayed at least an hour each day.

For those men, prayer had been an essential ingredient of life. But what about people in the hectic 20th century? What about me? Could I, starting here and now, spend an hour every day praying? As a resident surgeon, I had to be at the hospital and on the wards at seven in the morning. I rarely finished work before midnight. Where in a schedule like that could I find a spare hour? Not at bedtime certainly. I was too tired to stay awake. Not during the overcrowded hospital day. Only the early morning was left. I would have to set the alarm for 5:30 instead of 6:30 a.m.

Could I force myself out of bed at 5:30? If I did, would I still be able to function at the hospital? I didn't know, and there was no way to find out but to try. I settled on a two-week experiment to see if the plan was worthwhile.

The night before I began, I put the alarm clear across the room so I'd have to get out of bed to shut it off. In what seemed but a moment the alarm went off. I thought I must have set it wrong. I stumbled over to it and discovered that it really was 5:30 a.m. The sky was ink black, the apartment cold as a tomb. I had a great thought: With just five minutes' more sleep, I knew I could pray a lot more effectively.

However, I knew if I got back in bed, I would never make it. I felt my way out into the dark living room, I switched on a light, knelt down in front of the sofa and started to pray. I prayed for my family, friends, patients, the other doctors at the hospital, doctors at other hospitals, doctors who didn't have hospitals, our country, our soldiers, the enemy, their soldiers, all the missionaries I knew (both of them). At last I looked at my watch. Only 20 minutes had gone by.

How in the world could anyone find enough to pray about for an hour? I went back over the whole list in more detail, and at last 60 minutes crawled past. I was exhausted.

At noon in the hospital's operating room I felt enormously sleepy. I could see the headlines: "Surgeon Falls Asleep at Operating Table." However, I did not fall asleep, and it was a surprisingly good day. When the alarm went off at 5:30 the next morning, I was really tired. It was much tougher than the first morning.

I got up half-intending to turn the alarm off and tumble back into bed. But instead of picking up the clock, my hand grabbed a hairbrush, and one of the bristles stuck me under the nail. I woke up with a start. So I had my hour of prayer, and was able to continue the regimen for the 14-day period.

At the end of the two weeks I took inventory. I hadn't died as I'd been convinced I might. In fact, I hadn't even got sick. Looking back, I realized that in many ways they'd been inexplicably good weeks. Somehow, after the first two or three days, I seemed to feel wider awake on five hours' sleep than I'd been on six. My work at the hospital had gone well. It had proved to be a great spiritual blessing to me. I had seen a division in my church healed. I decided to continue the prayer time.

Weeks stretched into months and then to half a year. God was not only becoming real to me, He was becoming the meaning in all reality, and the hour which had started out seeming so

long now became more and more precious. My whole life, in fact, was different, and I knew the investment of time was paying off.

Then, Dr. Byron was inducted into the Marines. He struggled with how to keep his one hour prayer time there. What would the other guys think? There was no privacy in the barracks. He rationalized that he could pray in any position, God didn't need him to kneel in prayer. Then he realized the real issue was that he didn't want that roomful of guys see him pray. So, he decided it was kneel or nothing. He said it took all the courage he could muster to get down on his knees that first night. He took a lot of ribbing for it. Then, as they were shipped out, he says that then,

I— who a year earlier would have died at the thought of sharing Christ with the Marines in public— started holding public worship services.

The first night, 200 made first-time commitments to Christ.

What should we pray about?

THANKING GOD

When we thank God, we are placing Him in control and accepting what He has given us. This is always a good place to begin in prayer. And, most of us know to praise God for who He is and thank Him for all His blessings. But Paul takes us a step further in thanking God for those he is praying for. Do you begin there with your prayers for others?

Often we begin intercessory prayer for others with our requests, our lists of what we think they need. These may be good things like healing, a job, encouragement, or changes we'd like to see in them. But before any of that, try just thanking God for them, their personalities, and the unique person they are. Reflect upon those characteristics God has created in them— their particular gifts. How do you see God already at work in them? As you take some time to do this, you'll find yourself noticing things or remembering things about them— some comment or action that reveals their heart. Try to see them as God sees them and then affirm what He's done in them.

That's where we must start in prayer— appreciating what is there. Some people are introverts and some are extroverts. We have the laid-back people and those like the energizer bunny. Some are creative, some love sameness and routine. God loves variety. Celebrate that in your prayers of thanksgiving. Don't go to God asking Him to make another person into what you want or to do things the way you think they should be done.

Polly and I went to "The Sound of Music" at the PAC this last week— what a wonderful performance. But I was reminded again of that sub-theme with Marie, "finding her life"— discovering that her God-created personality didn't belong in monastic life. In prayer, we can get spirit-given insight into what that might mean for those for whom we pray.

Just consider the creation that surrounds us. I remember Steve Goodmiller telling me about beetles— did you know there are over one million species of beetles? And, some entomologists

think it could be as high as 30 million! There are more kinds of beetles than any other insect. Certainly we don't need *all* those species. Doesn't that say something about God's love for variety? Steve revels in collecting these amazing (in my mind, ugly) insects, noting differences, similarities, and enjoying in what God has made.

That's something of the picture I get with Paul as he prays. He goes through quite a list of things he sees in these new Christians for which he thanks God— all an outgrowth of their turning *from idols to serve the living and true God* (9). This kind of prayer keeps us from living on the surface of life. It helps us get beneath things and ask the question, "What would it look like for God's kingdom to be brought forth more fully in this person's life or in this situation?"

These prayers of thanksgiving are an ongoing process with Paul. He uses the words "always" and "continually." Prayer is not ever meant to be confined to a particular devotional time of the day. As we walk between things, as we drive, as we can in the midst of other things— let your mind be in prayer. Paul supported himself through making tents, so I envision him as he's sowing fabric together, at the same time in his heart being in prayer.

Dr. Ogilvie points out nine elements of a life transformed by the power of Christ that Paul mentions here— grouping them in three triads. I like that outline and will use his groupings.

FAITH, LOVE, AND HOPE

Verse 3 contains our first triad— marked "A" in our text.

*We continually remember before our God and Father
your work produced by **faith**,
your labor prompted by **love**,
and your endurance inspired by **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

This new life in Christ the Thessalonians have entered into is producing wonderful fruit. This triad of faith, hope, and love, is mentioned in nine places in the New Testament. Here Paul actually tells us what each one is producing in these believers.

Faith is always a gift of God implanted in our hearts to enable us to believe. Through this faith, we are enabled to trust Christ and His power to change our lives. While these Thessalonians are doing the things Christians are called to do, it is not their doing. It is all the result of the gift of faith the Holy Spirit gave in response to the preaching of the Gospel. As the reformation highlighted, faith alone.

The result of faith is **love**. The Greek word here is *agape*— a word for love that was rarely used before there were Christians because it is, in broad application, only made possible through Christ. It is the unilateral and unconditional love God shows us in sending Jesus to die for us. And we can only love in this way when we have the love of Christ within, imparted by the Spirit. When Paul speaks of *labor prompted by love*, he doesn't mean human effort. The Greek word for "labor" here reflects more of a spontaneous outflow from our lives.

Hope, Paul says gives us endurance. When you're going through things that are tough, if you can see the end, it enables you to endure, doesn't it? The end Paul mentions here is that no matter what, we have the Lord Jesus Christ on our side and He will be there at the right moment. Remember, this is a church facing huge persecution. Earthly hopes will ultimately disappoint us. How often has an event you put your hope in disappointed you? I remember someone telling me they had difficulty hoping because they had had so many hopes dashed when they were growing up. But we never need to worry about that with Jesus. He will never forsake us or disappoint us. At the right time, He will always be there for us.

AUTHENTIC CONVERSION– 2nd Triad, vs. 4-5, marked “B” in our text.

*For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has **chosen** you,
because our gospel came to you not simply with words,
but also **with power, with the Holy Spirit**
and with **deep conviction**.*

As Paul speaks of their conversion, he affirms they are **chosen**. The initiative is always with God. As Jesus tells his disciples,

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-fruit that will last (John 15:16).

It is good to remember that God, out of love, has called you to be His disciple. Therefore, He has a purpose and plan for you to fulfill.

Furthermore, the **Holy Spirit** gave witness to that choice by the **power** at work. That power was seen in the authority with which the Word was given forth, but also in miracles which attended the establishment of the churches on Paul's missionary journeys.

And a second evidence of their election was that they had **deep conviction**. “Full assurance” is perhaps a better translation, for the Greek word isn't talking about being convicted of our sins. It is a word talking about conviction as in being absolutely convinced and certain. These Thessalonians *knew* they were saved and belonged to Christ for all of eternity.

This last week, I read a comment in *Time* magazine by Tony Snow, the White House secretary who has been diagnosed with a recurrence of his cancer. Speaking to students at his alma mater, Davidson College (a Presbyterian school), he said,

“I am actually enjoying everything more than I ever have. God hasn't promised us tomorrow, but he has promised us eternity.”

I think he is reflecting the full assurance of salvation, a fruit of genuine conversion.

ENABLED– 3rd Triad, marked “C” in our text.

Here we see these new believers were enabled to do three things as a result of their conversion: 1, they became followers of the Lord (vs. 6); 2, they knew joy in affliction (vs. 6); 3, they became examples to others.

I'm afraid we don't have enough time to do justice to this triad, but you get the idea. As we

follow Christ, we are given beyond-the-natural power to not only walk in His way, but to do it with joy. Even affliction or persecution cannot stop that joy or peace or any of the other fruits of the Spirit.

George Chen was arrested for his evangelistic activities in China and served an 18-year sentence at hard labor. He was forced to work in the prison cesspool, where he spent his days in knee-deep human waste, turning it with a shovel to make compost. Chen says,

“They thought I’d be miserable, but actually I was happy. It smelled so bad that no one could come near me, so I could pray and sing aloud all day.”

That is the joy of the Lord and the product of His Spirit within bubbling to the surface.

And finally, Paul celebrates the example they are to other believers. Here we see an infectious influence in the way they serve God and live in continuous expectation of the return of Christ. What kind of influence is emanating from your life in Christ? Are you modeling the power of God for living in your life?

CONCLUSION

When I used the illustration of Dr. Byron experimenting with an hour of prayer, perhaps you too wondered, “How on earth can anyone pray a full hour?” But, if you move beyond the surface, “God bless” and “God be with” general prayers and begin moving deeper, reflectively trying to discern what God has done and is doing in that life, listening to the Holy Spirit, you’ll soon find an hour isn’t much at all. Prayer becomes much more interesting and fulfilling. As you lift up each person in prayer, it is easy to spend a couple of minutes on them prayerfully discerning what is going on and how God might be moving.

Because of this, I want to just offer some practical advice in closing, if you aren’t already doing it. Divide your prayer list into categories. I see them as concentric circles of relationships.

1. The first circle are those primary relationships we are closest too— our family and maybe a few others we know we should pray for daily. Often times for me, it takes me 10-15 min. just to pray through my family, and we have only one child!
2. Then, moving outward, there is a second circle of people not as close, but who have serious needs you want to pray for daily or almost daily.
3. Then, a third circle out, is what I see as routine periodic prayer concerns. For me, it involves the church family— I try to pray through a page of the church directory each day, the printed list in the back. This gets me through the church family each week. I’d encourage you to try that, and if a page a day is too much, cut it back to a half a page. I believe this would transform our church! In this third level you may want to include some national concerns, leaders, etc.

My point is, careful, reflective prayer is a lot more interesting than just quickly running down a prayer list. And, I believe it is better to pray well about a few things than just superficially about many things.

God works through prayer. In prayer, we become available for what God wants to do on earth

through us. But also, power is unleashed through our prayers for God's will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven."