

Paul's Prayer In Prison.

Text: Eph 3:13-21

Suggested Hymns:
325, 420, 424, 289, 887LSB

- 1) Is A Worthy Example Of Prayer In General
- 2) Is A Worthy Example Of Intercessory Prayer
In Particular

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Ephesians 3:13–21, ¹³ *Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.*

¹⁴ *For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, ¹⁶that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height — ¹⁹to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

²⁰ *Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, ²¹to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Our text emanated from a prison. Some great things have been wrought within the confines of stone walls and iron bars.

John Bunyan wrote his immortal allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* in Bedford jail. William Tyndale, to whom in a large measure we owe our English Bible, laboured on it during his imprisonment. Martin Luther worked on the German translation while confined in Wartburg Castle.

The Apostle Paul, while a prisoner at Rome, wrote his epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians. Later, in a

subsequent imprisonment, First and Second Timothy, and Titus; and all these letters of St. Paul form a part of God's inspired Word.

Our text is taken from his Epistle to the Ephesians. Paul could now no longer perform the active missionary work in which he had been engaged, but he could write, and he did; and what he wrote will live and go down through the ages.

Paul in prison could pray, and he did. This mighty means of usefulness, prayer, available to every Christian under all circumstances, the apostle did not permit to lie dormant.

Let us consider *Paul's Prayer in Prison*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Paul's Prayer In Prison Is A Worthy Example Of Prayer In General

Let us first note the features of Paul's exemplary prayer which apply to prayer in general.

While we may be familiar with the essentials of proper and effectual prayer, it is always refreshing to see how the doctrine which we have learned is borne out by other Scripture-passages besides the proof-texts in our Catechism.

Paul prayed on his knees. Our text says, ¹⁴ *For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. "Posture is not everything, but posture is something; posture is very much."* The tax collector stood with bowed head, saying, *"God be merciful to me, a sinner,"*¹ and his prayer was acceptable.

Others, for example David, Daniel, Ezra, the Wise Men from the East, and our Lord Himself in Gethsemane, bowed down upon their knees. Peter knelt as he prayed at the bier of Dorcas,² and Paul, with the elders at Miletus, *"kneeled down on the shore and prayed."*³ Kneeling in prayer is a good old Biblical custom.

True, there is no merit in our posture, and posture may become imposture. The main thing is that our heart be on its knees. It is, however, helpful to true devotion to bow the head, fold the hands, close the eyes, and to approach the throne of God in an attitude befitting a humble suppliant.

Note next to whom Paul prays. *I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,*¹⁵ *from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named.* He

did not pray to any saint. Being a prisoner, he did not call upon a patron saint of captives. Nowhere in the whole Bible is there one instance of a godly man praying to any saint.

The whole papal system of saint-worship, according to which Roman Catholics pray to departed human beings, to hundreds of different saints, for the different stations, conditions, and difficulties of life, has no warrant in the Scriptures.

The Apostle Paul prayed only to God. He called God *“Father,” the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* and the Father of *the whole family in heaven and earth*, all true believers on earth, the spirits of just men made perfect in glory, and all the holy angels.

Since we belong to this family, we may call God *“Father”* and say *“Our Father,”* as Christ taught us. God wants us to approach Him as *“Father”* and thus encourage us to pray without fear and doubt, for God is now our loving Father. Christ has reconciled us to God by His blood and cleared the way to the throne of grace by removing our sins, so that now we have access to the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Note that Paul prayed with firm confidence. He said of the Lord to whom he prayed ²⁰ *Now to Him who is able*. He was confident that God is Lord over all, the Almighty, with whom nothing is impossible, for whom nothing is too hard, who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.

Realising the possibilities of omniscience, he prayed not for trivialities, but asked for great, transcendent blessings, confident that his prayer availed much and that by prayer he linked himself with God’s almighty power.

We, beloved, live far below our possibilities as the sons and daughters of God. Our text says *according to the power that works in us*. The Lord’s mighty power has wrought in us our conversion and has kept us in the true faith.

Every Christian is a miracle. But although God has done wonders in us, He is able and anxious to do more. He is able to work in us far more than we think and to give us far greater things than we usually ask for.

We deserve nothing, but we may ask great and glorious things, and like Paul we should pray with the firm confidence that God *is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.*

Paul prays with an eye to God's glory. Our text says, ²¹ *to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.* To glorify the Lord was the chief purpose and aim of his life. We read in Philippians 1:20b–21a, *but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.* ²¹ *For to me, to live is Christ.*

In all things, including his prayers, Paul sought the glory of God. This is what we are to desire above all things in our prayers — God's glory. That is to be our chief purpose and aim, to glorify God, and everything else is to be subservient to that.

As long as a person regards himself as the sun around which his world must revolve, his prayer will be self-centred, selfish, and therefore ineffectual.

Pray for everything and anything, but let the dominant note be that God may be glorified. In sickness pray that you may get well. Why? Because you want to do more for God and your fellow-man in this world.

In poverty pray for money and goods, not that you may consume them upon your own lusts,⁴ but that you may use them as a faithful steward of God and have something to give to a person who has need, and to maintain and extend the kingdom of God to His glory.

If we want power in prayer, we must have a single eye to the glory of God in everything we ask.

2. Paul's Prayer In Prison Is A Worthy Example Of Intercessory Prayer In Particular.

We have noted the features of Paul's prayer which apply to prayer in general, of whatever nature.

Paul's prayer is also a worthy example of intercessory prayer in particular. He here prays for others, for the Church at Ephesus, which he himself had founded. He prays for the Christians there whom he had been instrumental in leading to Christ, through his preaching.

He would still have liked to be moving from city to city, from synagogue to synagogue, preaching the Gospel of Christ Crucified. But now his calling as a preacher was halted.

He was confined in prison. He says ¹³ ***Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you.*** Tribulation! To a man of Paul's temperament, imprisonment must have been a tribulation indeed.

No doubt he prayed for himself. We might suppose that, being in such a plight, his whole concern would be for himself. But no, the Apostle thought of his spiritual children.

He feared that some of the weaker ones would stumble and be offended or perhaps succumb to the sneers of his enemies over his present plight. Therefore he said, ¹³ ***Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.***

He is in prison for preaching the Gospel. There is no shame in that, but glory both for him and for them. Paul thought of his spiritual children and prayed for them in spite of the fact that he himself was in tribulations.

Dear friends, although we have cares and troubles of our own, possibly a heavy burden to bear, let us nevertheless think of others and pray for them. By so doing, our own cares will be alleviated and our own burden be lightened.

We may be helpless in some ways, but we can all help others by our prayers in their behalf. A praying man is never a useless man. An invalid confined to bed, who can run no errands of mercy, can still pray.

Old age, infirmity, may confine a person, but he can still pray for others and help the cause of the Lord effectually and glorify God by his prayers.

It is instructive also to note for what Paul prayed in his intercession for others. He did not pray that they might have temporal prosperity, rather he prayed that they might have spiritual prosperity.

We read, ¹⁶ ***that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and***

length and depth and height — ¹⁹ to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

In these words he prayed for the spiritual welfare of the Christians at Ephesus, that they might be strengthened in the inner man, in their spiritual life, that Christ might continue to dwell in their hearts by faith, that their love might be deeply rooted and firmly-grounded, that they might grow in the knowledge of the love of Christ, which is so surpassingly great in its breadth and length and depth and height, that they might be filled with all the fullness of God.

Paul asks great things for them, large spiritual gifts, that they might grow mightily in grace, in spiritual strength, in faith, in love, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

And these are the things which we should pray for above all else in our intercession for others — spiritual gifts. We are not forbidden to pray for temporal blessings. We are urged to pray also for temporal things, but we are to realise how infinitely more important are the things eternal.

If a mother, in praying for her children, asks that they might win worldly honour, enjoy prosperity and success, but does not ask spiritual gifts for them, if in her prayer she has no interest in, and no petition for, their souls, — then such a short-sighted mother has asked for a stone instead of bread, for a scorpion instead of an egg, for a serpent instead of a fish.⁵

Rather she should offer up some such petitions as those of St. Paul in our text, or as the hymnist wrote,⁶

Let my near and dear ones be
Always near and dear to Thee.
Oh, bring me and all I love
To Thy happy home above.

We all have an immortal soul and we should above all else ask for immortal things, heavenly and eternal gifts.

Great things, even immortal and eternal things, are wrought by prayer. Therefore learn to pray and pray. Perhaps you, like Paul, are somehow in prison, or fettered in some way. Nevertheless you can pray. May this lesson from the example of St. Paul's prayer in prison help you.

Let us conclude with the words of the hymnist,⁷

O Thou, by whom we come to God,
The life, the truth, the way,
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod:
Lord, teach us how to pray. Amen

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Luke 18:13

² Acts 9:36-40

³ Acts 21:5

⁴ James 4:3

⁵ Luke 11:11-12, Matthew 7:9-10

⁶ TLH 653, ALHB 887

⁷ Hymn 424 v7