

Ephesians God's New Community
The Power of Prayer!
Ephesians 6:19-23
20th March 2022
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

Introduction: Do we really believe in the power of prayer?

More than 40 years ago, when I was a student on a work placement near St Albans one line in a sermon had a deep impact upon me. In fact it was a question the preacher kept asking: *"Do you believe in the peril of the ungodly?"*

Do you really believe what the Bible teaches, that if a person dies without knowing Jesus Christ, they will go to a place of eternal lostness the Bible calls hell? Do you *really* believe that? What the preacher meant by the persistent question, I am sure, was "If you say you believe in the peril of the ungodly, what impact does that belief have upon your actions, your witness to family, friends, work colleagues, and so on?"

I have a question for us all this morning. *Do you and I believe in the power of prayer?* Do we believe that God delights to hear the prayers of his children, and that he has the power to change people and change situations in response to the petitions of his people, in line with his will? Do you and I *truly* believe that?

Do we really believe the Bible accounts of answered prayer?

As Moses lifted up his hands in prayer, Israel *won the battle against the Amalekites* (Exodus 17). When Joshua was running out of daylight to win a battle he prayed *for the day to be extended*—and the sun stood still, (Joshua 10). Hannah prayed in anguish about *her lack of children*, God heard her tears and in due time little Samuel was born, (1 Samuel 1). Elijah earnestly prayed that *it would not rain* as judgement on wicked king Ahab, and for three years it did not rain; and then he prayed for rain and it did! (1 Kings 17-18). What about Hezekiah? *At the point of death* he prayed to live and God heard his tears and gave him 15 more years of life, (2 Kings 20). The church prayed *for courage* to preach the Gospel after Peter and John had been imprisoned, and sure enough "they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God *boldly*." (Acts 4) Do we *really* believe these accounts, brothers and sisters?

Do we believe God's promises to answer prayer?

"The Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous." (Proverbs 15:29) *"Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear."* (Isaiah 65:24) *"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it, and it will be yours."* (Mark 11:24) *"The prayer of a righteous man (or woman) is powerful and effective."* (James 5:16)

Do we believe our own experience of answered prayer?

And finally, do we remember and believe our own personal experience of answered prayer? The times both individually, and together as a church, we have asked God for one good thing or another, one deliverance or another, and God has heard and answered our prayers? I remember one occasion where Yvonne and I with three little children were on the verge of being homeless. We were on holiday, and I remember crying out to God in our need, and he began to answer our prayers *the very next day*, with a complete response shortly afterwards. (God sometimes answers prayer in stages). And there have been *many other* occasions when God has heard our prayers. And you will have your own stories to recall, I am sure.

Do you and I, brothers and sisters, *really believe* in the power of prayer? That's my question for us today. The apostle Paul believed in the power of prayer. That's why he connected *prayer* to the *spiritual armour* God has given us, which helps us to "*be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.*" (verse 10). He ends his description of the spiritual battle with "*And pray...*", verse 18. Either he wants us to imagine prayer as the seventh piece of spiritual armour—perhaps a javelin or spear or something like that— or he wants us to know that prayer is a powerful part of the spiritual warfare we are all engaged in. "*And pray...*" Either way, Paul is teaching us that prayer is an indispensable part of fighting the good fight of faith. There is an unbreakable connection between spiritual victory, spiritual power, and prayer.

My prayer for today is that God would encourage us both individually and together to be a prayerful people. Let's begin with Paul guidelines, his instructions for prayer, verse 18.

#1 Paul's Prayer Guidelines

So how should we pray? What guidelines does Paul give?

1) *Pray in the Spirit*, "Pray in the Spirit", verse 18. To pray in the Spirit is to be aware of the matters God wants you to pray for; has the Lord placed someone on your heart? Pray for them. To pray in the Spirit is to rely on the power or the energy of the Holy Spirit to transform hearts and minds and lives. To pray in the Spirit is to remember that our weak prayers are heard by God with the help of his Holy Spirit who intercedes for us: "*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.*" (Romans 8:26-27) Do you sometimes think, "My prayers are so weak?" Don't worry! Just pray and the Spirit of God will make your prayers intelligible and effective in heaven.

2) *Pray on all occasions*, "*Pray in the Spirit on all occasions*", verse 18. Whatever the occasion, pray. When you are sad, when you are happy. When good news drops in your email account, when bad news stops by. On all and every occasion—pray.

Remember how Matthew Henry prayed after he was robbed? 1.) I am thankful that the thief never robbed me before. 2), I am thankful that although he took my wallet, he did not take my life. 3) I thank you that although he took all I had, it was not much. And 4), I am glad that it was I who was robbed, not I who did the robbing." Pray on all occasions!

3) *Pray all kinds of prayers*. "With all kinds of prayers and requests." There are at least five parts to prayer. There are *confession prayers*, where we ask God to forgive us for our wrongdoing. There are *worship prayers* where we praise God for how great he is. There are *prayers of thanksgiving* where we thank God for the good gifts he showers us with. There are *intercessory prayers*, where we lift up to God people here and around the world. There are *petition prayers*, where we ask God for specific things for *ourselves*. How is your prayer diet? All sausages no greens? All puddings no vegetables? It is all too easy for our prayers to get unbalanced, and perhaps to err on the side of pleases and requests, without perhaps enough worship and intercession.

4) *Pray without giving up*, "always keep on praying." Jesus told the story of a poor widow, in Luke 18, who kept on going back to the judge for justice. He had no interest because he wouldn't be making any money on her case. So he turned her down again and again, but she persevered, until one day, fed up with her nagging he took on her case: "*And will not God*", Jesus says, "*bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?*" (Luke 18:7)

Has someone forgotten that *persistent* prayer is part of *normal* Christian prayer. God's timetable is rarely the same as ours. Just keep on praying! Don't give up on any situation or any one. Keep on praying!

5) *Pray for all God's people, "keep on praying for all the saints."* "Saint" is the Bible's word for every Christian. Saint means "holy one", every Christian has been made holy by the forgiveness of all our sins through the cross of Jesus Christ. We should pray for everyone in the world, but the Scriptures do teach that we should *pray especially* for God's people, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, here in our local church, wider afield in Worcester, in the UK, in the whole world, and especially those who are being persecuted for their faith. There was an amusing scene at a recent football match between Norwich City and Brentford. Christian Erikson and Brandon Williams ended up in a tussle on the pitch, Brandon was really cross with Erikson for grabbing his shirt, he looked like he was going to throw him a punch—until he realised who the other player was! Christian Erikson! No-one can be cross with a player who has come back to football after a heart attack on the pitch last June! The instant Williams realised who had fouled him his scowl became a smile! "He's my brother."

Let's include in our prayers those who have hurt us too. However another believer may have tripped you up, offended you, hurt you, dealt unjustly with you, they are still a brother or sister in Christ, and we should not only forgive them in our hearts but remember them in our prayers too. "*Pray for all the saints.*"

(2) Paul's Prayer Example

To spur us onto prayer, Paul gives us a personal example. He tells us that without prayer he does not have the right words or the courage to do his work of preaching the Gospel. So he asks his Christian friends to pray for the right words and for courage. We should note in passing that Paul is writing from prison: most likely, a crowded, noisy dark cell filled with desperate prisoners and angry guards. He still thinks of himself as an ambassador of Christ, "ambassador in chains", verse 20, wherever Paul is he's still a spokesperson for the Lord, he's still got a job to do, a mission to fulfil, whether free or in chains! Remarkably, there's no pity-party here; Paul does not ask for freedom, kindness from the guards, enough to eat or a good night's sleep. His prayer is that he would be able to share the Gospel with fellow prisoners and guards in an effective way, because he feels weak on two fronts: (i) *Paul does not know what to say*, so he writes: "*Pray also for me that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me.*" "I want to get the words just right, for this prisoner, for that guard." (ii) *Paul is fearful of sharing the Gospel* in that prison, so he asks for courage, not once, but twice: "*so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.*" Paul can't run away! It takes courage to preach to a captive audience! If they don't like what you say—and the Gospel has an offense to it—they could make life very difficult for you!

Paul is just like us: he's weak. He doesn't know what to say and he's fearful. So he asks his Christian friends to pray for words and courage to be given to him. Paul sets for us a personal example of his need of prayer. "Pray also for me." Not for his personal comfort, but for the advancement of God's kingdom in a Roman prison.

(3) God's Prayer Word to us Today

Let me end by asking: What is God saying to you about prayer today? The Lord will show you. Perhaps you don't pray, not yet!, and this sermon has been a mystery to you! Well the very first prayer to pray is this: "Lord have mercy on me a sinner." And you can pray that today! And if you do pray it, tell someone!

But perhaps you've been a believer for years. What is God saying to you this morning? Is he encouraging you to persevere in prayer? Is he teaching you to widen your prayers? What is the Lord saying to you? I was personally struck this week by the way Paul is open about his weaknesses. "I don't know what words to use" "I am afraid." Very often we who are pastors and evangelists can think we have to be strong and look strong

and not reveal our weaknesses or fears. But Paul teaches otherwise, he tells his friends he doesn't know what to say and he frightened. We Gospel-workers must learn to be open, so people can pray intelligently. What is God saying to the Church? I know that the Lord is encouraging us, through these words, to keep on praying, and not to give up, on Sundays, in our home groups. And perhaps to pray more for those who are called to preach the Word? That the Lord would give them the right words and the courage to speak? Would you do that every week? Pray for Sunday's preacher and Sunday's sermon? Prayer IS a powerful thing!

*It makes the darkened clouds withdraw;
pray'r climbs the ladder Jacob saw;
gives exercise to faith and love;
brings ev'ry blessing from above.*

*Restraining pray'r, we cease to fight;
pray'r makes the Christian's armor bright;
and Satan trembles when he sees
the weakest saint upon his knees.*

May the Lord encourage us this morning through his word.