

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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FORWARD IN PRAYER

Philippians 4:4-8

Jesus wants you to go forward in your life as a Christian. He wants you to grow in His grace, and to keep on growing. He wants you to grow in your knowledge and understanding of Him, and to keep on growing (2 Peter 3:18). He does not want you to be satisfied with the status quo in your spiritual life. He wants you to grow up to full maturity in Him (Ephesians 4:13). He wants you to become more and more like Him in your character and conduct, in who you are and how you live. As we saw two Sundays ago, Jesus wants you and me, in the words of Paul, to “press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called (us) heavenward” through faith in Him (Philippians 3:14).

The question is: How do you go forward in your spiritual life? How do you go forward in developing and deepening your relationship with God? How do you become more like Jesus?

As we saw last Sunday, the Bible is indispensable. God has spoken to us in the Bible. And still speaks today. The Bible is the voice of God speaking to us. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3, it is “God-breathed” from start to finish. It comes *from* God. It is inspired *by* God. It bears the stamp of God’s authority. It is useful for teaching us the truth, showing us the error of our ways, convicting us of our sins, showing us the right way to live, and training us in godly living. It announces to us the gospel of God’s saving grace and love. It introduces us to Jesus, the true Son of God and Savior of sinners, who alone has the words and the power of eternal life. In the words of Psalm 119, it is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path (119:105), showing us how to live in a right relationship with God. It is unlike any other book ever written. It is alive; it is active; it is powerful; it is “sharp as a surgeon’s scalpel” (*MSG*); it cuts through all our doubts and excuses and misconceptions; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts (Hebrews 4:12).

You go forward in your life as a Christian by letting “the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16). You go forward by spending time with the Bible daily, allowing God to speak to you, teach you, direct you, shape you, and change you through His Word.

You go forward by availing yourself of the spiritual nourishment found in God’s Word – nourishment that is essential to your health and vitality and well-being as a follower of Jesus in this world.

Time with God in His Word is not the only means by which you go forward in your spiritual life. You go forward, as well, by cultivating – by growing and deepening – your relationship with God in prayer, which is what I want to talk about with you today.

Prayer is hard for some of us. It shouldn’t be, but it is. Maybe it is because we feel unworthy to talk to God. Maybe it is because we feel inadequate, or we feel like our prayers themselves – the words we use when we pray – are not good enough. Maybe it is because we don’t know

how to pray or what to pray for. Maybe we think prayer is a waste of time. Maybe we think “thoughts and prayers” are a poor excuse for not “doing something” about the terrible tragedies and perplexing problems that plague our society. Maybe we have been conditioned – at least here in America – to value achievement and productivity, while prayer too often seems unproductive to us. And maybe we have prayed for things in the past and did not receive the answers we hoped for.

Prayer is hard for me sometimes. By this time in my life, it shouldn’t be, but it is. Just because I’m a pastor doesn’t mean I don’t struggle with prayer. I should be much further along in my life as a praying Christian than I am. Maybe this is true for you, too. I believe in the power of prayer. I have seen God answer prayers in ordinary and extraordinary ways. I believe prayer is one of the primary means God has provided for us to grow closer to Him and to participate in the work of His kingdom in this world. But I am so easily distracted from the practice of prayer itself. I can always find something else to do. Is it true for you?

Prayer pervades the pages of the Bible. As Charles Spurgeon points out in his classic devotional, *Morning and Evening*, “we can scarcely begin reading the Bible before encountering a phrase such as: ‘At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD’” (Genesis 4:26; Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, January 2 Morning).

The Bible is full of examples of people who prayed. Abraham prayed. So did his son Isaac and Isaac’s son Jacob. Moses prayed. Manoah, the father of Samson, prayed. He knew he would need help in raising his son. Samson prayed, too, in spite of the fact that he had not lived in close fellowship with God. Hannah prayed, and the Lord gave her a son. Samuel, the son God gave her, prayed, too.

Saul, the first king of Israel, prayed. So did David. Many of his prayers are in the Book of Psalms. David’s son Solomon prayed. When God appeared to him and told him he could ask for anything, Solomon did not ask for wealth or riches or honor, for power or fame or pleasures. He prayed for wisdom and understanding to lead and govern the nation of Israel (2 Chronicles 1), a prayer that pleased the heart of God.

The prophet Elijah prayed. He prayed in his monumental contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18, and in response to his prayers the Lord sent fire to consume his offering, giving dramatic proof that the Lord is God. Then, as James reminds us in the New Testament, Elijah, who was an ordinary man like us, “prayed hard that it would not rain.” And do you know what happened? It did not rain – “not a drop for three and a half years. Then he prayed that it would rain, and it did. The showers came and everything started growing again” (James 5:17-18, *MSG*).

The reason James tells us about Elijah is to teach us that “the prayer of the person who is right with God is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). Or, as *The Message* says: “The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with.” Which is something God wants you and me to take seriously.

Elijah's protégé Elisha prayed, too. King Hezekiah prayed. So did his son Manasseh, one of the absolute worst kings in the history of Judah, who experienced a spiritual awakening late in life that produced a remarkable change in him. Ezra the priest prayed. Nehemiah prayed for God's favor, wisdom, and protection. Job prayed. Jeremiah prayed. Daniel prayed, even when it got him thrown into the lions' den. Jonah prayed from the belly of a great fish.

In the New Testament, we see Jesus teaching His disciples to pray (Matthew 6:5ff; Luke 11:1ff). After His resurrection and ascension, we find Jesus' followers meeting together "constantly in prayer" (Acts 1:14). In Acts 2, after the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread *and in prayer*" (Acts 2:42, emphasis added). In Acts 4, when Peter and John were released from prison, the believers had a prayer meeting in which "they raised their voices together in prayer to God" (Acts 4:24). Later on in Acts, we read of the apostles praying as they commissioned the first deacons (6:6), of Stephen (7:59), Cornelius (10:1ff), and Peter (10:9ff) praying. We read of the church praying for Peter when he was in prison (12:5), just as we pray and must keep on praying for Pastor Andrew Brunson. We read of Paul and Silas having a prayer meeting in prison in Philippi (16:25). We read of Paul praying with the elders from Ephesus (20:36).

Paul has a lot to say about prayer. Several of his letters, including Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, contain specific prayers for the believers in the churches to whom he is writing – prayers that are applicable to our lives today. In Colossians 4:12, he speaks of a tireless prayer warrior named Epaphras, who "is always wrestling in prayer for you" (NIV) – "praying that you'll stand firm, mature and confident in everything God wants you to do" (MSG).

Everybody, not just the Colossians, could use an Epaphras in their life. Maybe, just maybe, God wants you (and me) to be an Epaphras in somebody's life, to "wrestle in prayer" for them. It is something to think about. Even more, to *pray* about.

In his instructions about prayer, Paul urges us in Colossians 4:2 to "devote (ourselves) to prayer, being watchful and thankful." In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, he says we should "pray continually," which means that there is never a time when it is not time to pray.

He reminds Timothy of the primacy of prayer in 1 Timothy 2, where he says: "The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know. Pray especially for rulers' – monarchs, presidents, prime ministers, governors, mayors – "and their governments to rule well so we can (go) quietly about our business of living (godly and holy lives) – the way God our Savior wants us to live" (1 Timothy 2:1-3, MSG). A moment later he says: "I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing" (2:8). The thing that matters most here is not lifting up your hands, but having a godly attitude toward others and making prayer a priority in your life.

In Romans 12:12, he says we are to "be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, [and] faithful in prayer." Affliction will come. Suffering happens. We must not allow the hard things in life to keep us from prayer. Instead, those hard things must drive us *to* prayer.

In Ephesians 6, Paul tells us that prayer is a key part of the arsenal God has given us for the spiritual battles we face in this life. He tells us to “be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power” and to “put on the full armor of God” to “stand firm” against the devil and all the “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” There is a war on, and we’ve got to use all the means at our disposal to do battle with the enemy of our souls. God gives us “the belt of truth,” “the breastplate of righteousness,” the shoes of “the gospel of peace,” “the shield of faith, with which to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one,” “the helmet of salvation,” and “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God” (Ephesians 6:10-17).

But there is more in our arsenal. Paul continues: “Pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind,” he says, “be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (6:18) – for one another and for all believers everywhere. Then Paul pleads for prayers for himself and for his ministry: “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I may 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” (6:19-20). Despite the fact that he was under arrest, despite the fact that he was “in chains,” Paul knew that God was – *is* – still sovereign, and he was determined to let God use him, even in the circumstances of his imprisonment, to get the message of the gospel out to those who needed to hear it. Prayer was an essential element in making that happen. Paul believed that God uses prayer to accomplish His kingdom purposes.

How about you? Do you believe that? I pray you do. I pray that God will increase your faith in His power to work through your prayers. And that He will deepen your devotion to Him in and through a life of prayer.

In the passage we read from Philippians 4, Paul urges us to combat and conquer our anxieties and worries over the things that cause undue stress and distress in our lives through prayer. Verses 4-8 contain five different exhortations for living the kind of life God wants us to live:

- Rejoice in the Lord always. (This is so important Paul says it twice in verse 4 to make sure we get the point.)
- Let your gentleness be evident to everyone (verse 5).
- Don’t be anxious about anything (verse 6).
- Instead, present your requests to God (verse 6).
- Focus your mind on things that are true and right and pleasing in God’s sight (verse 8).

Let’s focus for a moment on the two in verse 6 and the result in verse 7 of putting them into practice. These verses may be more relevant today than you realize. In his book *Worry Less, Live More*, Robert Morgan writes: “Amazon keeps track of your highlights.” Did you know that? “When e-book owners mark sentences, the online retailer knows and notes it.”

Recently Amazon released a list of the most popular passages in some of its bestselling books, such as *The Hunger Games*, the *Harry Potter* series, and *Pride and Prejudice* as well as the most highlighted passage in the Bible. Morgan says he expected it to be John 3:16, Psalm 23, or perhaps the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6. “But, no, it was a less prominent text, but one that’s striking a deep cord in today’s worried world. It was Philippians 4:6-7” (Morgan, *Worry Less, Live More*, xiii). Maybe it shouldn’t be a surprise to us. And maybe we should realize that anxiety or worry is not a new phenomenon. It has been a problem since at least

the 1st century, or Jesus wouldn't have talked about it as He did, and Paul would have had no reason to write about it.

Paul's message here is that the answer to anxiety is prayer. A life of prayer, including thanksgiving, will enable you to put the cares and concerns of life in proper perspective. It can make a world of difference when you're feeling the weight of this life's stresses and pressures. As it says in *The Message*, "It is wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life." Instead of worrying, "let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns." And leave the answers to your prayers to God.

Even if anxiety or worry is not an issue in your life, the message of Scripture is still the same: "In *everything*, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." And the result? "The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7, emphasis added).

In addition to all these references to prayer in the letters of Paul, we have the counsel of James in James 5:13ff that "all of life is to be bathed in prayer" (R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith that Works*, 237). All of life – when we're down, when we're up, when we're in trouble, when illness invades, when there is sin to be dealt with, when others are in need – all of life is to be bathed in prayer. Some people, Christians included, view prayer as a kind of last resort. You know, it's what you do when you've tried everything else and there is nothing else to do. We really ought to know better than that. Instead of our last resort, we should see prayer as our first resort. It may not be the only thing we do, but it ought to be the first thing we do. And it ought to pervade everything we do, as we trust the Lord to work in and through all the details of life.

Then we have the invitation in Hebrews 4:16 to "approach the throne of grace" – to come into the presence of God, to come to Jesus just as we are – "with confidence" (or boldness) "so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." Let's face it: "Our time of need" is all the time. There is never a moment in this life that is not your time of need. Or mine. There is never a moment when you are not in need of the riches of God's mercy and grace. Never a moment. The good news is that there is never a moment when His grace and mercy are not available to you. There is never a moment when our Heavenly Father is not available to you. His door is always open to you.

We're not finished with this survey of prayer in the Bible. I haven't even touched on what Jesus says about prayer and the central role prayer played in His life on earth. We'll come back to it, because it is too important for us to miss.

Let me come back to Spurgeon again as I bring this message to a close. He says: "If (God) has said a great deal about prayer, it is because He knows we have great need of it. Our necessities are so deep that, until we are in heaven, we mustn't stop praying. Don't you lack anything?" [If you think you don't] "Then, I am afraid you do not know the extent of your poverty. Don't you have some mercy to ask of God?" [If you think you don't] "Then, may the Lord's mercy show you your misery.... Prayer is the lisping of the believing infant, the

shout of the fighting believer, the requiem of the dying saint falling asleep in Jesus. It is the breath, the watchword, the comfort, the strength, the honor of a Christian. If you are a child of God, you will seek your Father's face and live in your Father's love" (Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, January 2 Morning).

In another place, Spurgeon comments on a relatively obscure Old Testament verse – Leviticus 6:13 – which says: "The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out." Comparing the prayer life of a Christian to the altar where sacrifices were offered to God, he says we must keep the altar of private, personal prayer burning. We must not let the fire go out. Such devotion, he says, is "the very essence, evidence, and barometer of [a] vital and experiential (faith)." His advice? "Let your seasons of prayer be regular, frequent, and undisturbed." Not sure what to pray for? Spurgeon suggests "the church, the ministry, your own soul, your children, your relations, your country, and the cause of God and truth throughout the world." There is plenty there to keep us busy in prayer.

He asks: "Do we engage with lukewarmness in private devotion? Is the fire of devotion burning dimly in our hearts? Do the chariot wheels drag heavily?" (Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, July 15 Morning)

It can happen to anyone.

You cannot go forward in your life as a Christian unless you are continuing to cultivate a life of prayer, which provides an ongoing connection and conversation between you and God. You cannot go forward in your relationship with God without making prayer a priority in your life.

Will you make it a priority to take time to pray this week? Every day? Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.