

Apostle Paul's Secret to Mountain-Moving Prayer

Imagine the situation: The “best” and most effective missionary your church supports is suddenly arrested and thrown into prison. You need to rally prayer for his situation, so you take to email, Facebook, announcements in church, specially called prayer meetings—any way you can to enlist intercession.

What do you pray? Of course, your first prayer is, “Lord, free him from prison. He needs to get back on the front lines of ministry.”

That was exactly the situation that faced the church at Ephesus—minus the email and Facebook, of course. Believers received word that the apostle Paul had been arrested in Rome. He was chained to two guards day and night. The church needed to rally everyone to pray. But how were they supposed to pray?

They were probably dumbfounded when Paul sent word: “Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me 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” (Eph. 6:19–20). Wait. Paul can’t possibly be asking to stay in prison. He must have forgotten to mention the obvious need to be released. Why was Paul asking for help in declaring the gospel when he was no longer able to preach to anyone while in prison? Or was he?

Paul was not being guarded by just any guards—he was being guarded by Caesar’s elite bodyguards. These were the guys most loyal to Caesar who would be given highly responsible positions in the Roman Empire for their faithful service. They would rule the Roman Legions in Judea, Gaul, Spain, and Britain. And Paul was declaring the gospel to them.

I can picture Paul, working on some letter to some church, turning to one of his guards and saying, “Hey, Marcus. Will you read this part? Does this make sense to you?” He was asking for prayer for fearlessness in his witness because he knew he was right where he could be most effective for the kingdom.

Can you imagine how rapidly the gospel could spread around the known world if these guards—who now held positions of authority over these regions of the world—became believers of Jesus Christ?

Kingdom Opportunities

Somehow over the past 30-40 years or so, the Western Church has missed the boat on the power and purpose of prayer. In our attempts to grow our churches the American way—get as big as possible—we have changed the focus of our prayers from growing the kingdom of God to making our lives better.

Most churches focus all their prayer efforts and experiences on meeting the needs of their people. So they have prayer chains, times in services to pray for people, prayer sheets for requests, and so on. These are all good things to pray toward. But when these kinds of prayers become the main thrust of a church’s prayer focus—or worse, the only thing—something is severely out of whack. That church will not grow the kingdom!

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave a challenge to put His kingdom over our needs:

“Therefore, I say to you, take no thought about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they do not sow, nor do they reap, nor gather into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much better than they? Who among you by taking thought can add a cubit to his

stature?

“Why take thought about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: They neither work, nor do they spin. Yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not dressed like one of these. Therefore, if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is here and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore, take no thought, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ (For the Gentiles seek after all these things.) For your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you. Therefore, take no thought about tomorrow, for tomorrow will take thought about the things of itself. Sufficient to the day is the trouble thereof” (Matt. 6:25–34).

While Jesus’ model prayer does support the practice of asking for daily needs, He first hits the importance of the kingdom: “... your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (6:10). It would seem that, as a believer, it is more important to focus on growing the kingdom.

We see this kingdom principle also in what is perhaps the most widely quoted prayer promise on the pages of Scripture: “If you remain in Me, and My words remain in you, you will ask whatever you desire, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7). What a great promise! It means I should get everything I want, right?

But we need to put this verse in context. That promise is smack in the middle of the passage where Jesus shared that He is the Vine—and as believers, we are branches. As branches, Jesus explained, our primary purpose is to stay attached to Him so that we can bear fruit. We are to draw everything through the sustenance of the Vine. Jesus provides our

nutrients. We take in His Word so we can be obedient to it and live it out. When we do this, we will bear fruit. That means helping other believers grow deeper in their walks, leading people to Christ, and shining as lights for the kingdom.

If we do that, what happens to how we pray in a situation? Instead of praying a perhaps selfish, quick-fix prayer, I now want to pray what the Father tells me to pray. I want to pray the fruit-bearing thing. So I look at the situation and pray for the kingdom to grow through what has come into my life or my friend's life. I pray for boldness for Paul, rather than "get him out of prison, Lord."

Paul's Prayer Life

We see this same principle at work throughout Paul's letters to the churches. There are 19 places scattered through the Epistles where Paul reveals a prayer he is praying for believers. None of those prayers cover an obvious answer to a specific need. Even when Paul asked believers to pray for him, he never requested prayer for a personal need.

Perhaps that was due to the time in which he lived. Immediate communication was not possible—no cell phone, no prayer chain, no email, no good postal system to move a letter within a few days. It would be hard to pray for specific and personal needs several months later—especially when you didn't know what was happening to Paul right then.

So instead of focusing on everyday stuff, Paul shifts the emphasis to spiritual growth. This is what Paul told the Ephesian believers he was praying for them:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably

great power for us who believe (Eph. 1:17–19).

Paul's model does not indicate I should not pray for everyday needs. But what it should tell us is that there are far more important things on which to focus the majority of our prayers. Perhaps we should focus first on praying for spiritual growth in the life of the one with the need, rather than pray the obvious quick fix.

I try to operate according to three principles when I pray for a situation in someone's life:

1. I don't pray the obvious—at least not at first. Instead, I ask the Holy Spirit how I should pray. What does God want to do to bring glory to Himself in this situation?
2. I pray the process rather than the results. The Holy Spirit may direct me to pray the obvious, but often I sense a spiritual fruit or a kingdom growth principle to focus on. So I usually pray more for spiritual development in the life of the one with the need. Yes, I will from time to time be led to pray for a miraculous fix. But that is not the majority of the time.
3. When I do not know what the Lord wants me pray, I look to His Word and pray Scripture. I find a verse or passage that the Holy Spirit nudges me to pray.

For individuals, I challenge you to follow similar guidelines when praying for others. Churches, I challenge you to make sure that there is far more outward praying in the public ministry of your church. In other words, prayer in a church worship service should more often focus on praying for the community, the nation, the lost, and the moving of the Spirit in the midst of your congregation—than on personal needs from within. You can still have your prayer chains and prayer sheet, but don't make needs-based praying the focal point of

your public prayers.

A congregation that witnesses its church pray in powerful, eternal, and kingdom-impacting ways will learn to pray in the same way, regardless of personal circumstances. They will mature in their prayer lives just as the New Testament believers did when their beloved friend Paul was in a seemingly hopeless situation. Paul resisted the urge to simply get out of prison, and rather pointed his friends to prayers of the more lasting result of kingdom expansion

What Did Paul Pray?

Ephesians 1:17–18—A spirit of wisdom and revelation

Ephesians 3:16–21—Strengthened with power and to know Christ's love

Colossians 1:9–14—Knowledge of God's will

1 Timothy 1:17—Prayer of praise

1 Thessalonians 5:23—Sanctification

Romans 15:13—Filled with joy and peace

2 Corinthians 13:7–10—Do what is right

2 Thessalonians 1:11–12—Fulfill every good purpose

Philippians 1:9–11—Love may abound

2 Thessalonians 3:5—Direct your hearts into love and perseverance

Colossians 4:12 —Standing firm in the will of God

1 Thessalonians 3:12–13—May love increase and overflow to others

Romans 15:5–6—Unity Philemon 6—Active in sharing faith

2 Thessalonians 2:16–17—Encourage and strengthen

1 Thessalonians 1:2–3—Thanking God for them

Colossians 1:3–4—Thanking God for their faith

Romans 10:1—For Israel to be saved {eoa}

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