

Paul, a Pattern of Prayer

Chapter 13 from *Ministry of Intercession* by Andrew Murray

Go and inquire for one called Saul of Tarsus; for, behold, he prays.—Acts 9: 11.

For this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting.—1 Tim. 1:16.

God took His own Son, and made Him our example and our pattern. It sometimes is as if the power of Christ's example is lost in the thought that He, in whom is no sin, is not man as we are. Our Lord took Paul, a man of like passions with ourselves, and made him a pattern of what he could do for one who was the chief of sinners. And Paul, the man who, more than any other, has set his mark on the Church, has ever been appealed to as a pattern man.

In his mastery of Divine truth, and his teaching of it; in his devotion to his Lord, and his self-consuming zeal in His service; in his deep experience of the power of the indwelling Christ and the fellowship of His cross; in the sincerity of his humility, and the simplicity and boldness of his faith; in his missionary enthusiasm and endurance—in all this, and so much more, “the grace of our Lord Jesus was exceeding abundant in him.” Christ gave him, and the Church has accepted him, as a pattern of what Christ would have, of what Christ would work. Seven times Paul speaks of believers following him: 1 Cor. 4:16, 11:1, Phil. 3:17, 4:9; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9.

If Paul, as a pattern of prayer, is not as much studied or appealed to as he is in other respects, it is not because he is not in this too as remarkable a proof of what grace can do, or because we do not, in this respect, as much stand in need of the help of his example. A study of Paul as a pattern of prayer will bring a rich reward of instruction and encouragement. The words our Lord used of him at his conversion, “Behold he prays,” may be taken as the keynote of his life.

The heavenly vision that brought him to his knees ever after ruled his life. Christ at the right hand of God, in whom we are blessed with all spiritual blessings, was everything to him; to pray and expect the heavenly power in his work and on his work, from heaven direct by prayer was the simple outcome of his faith in the Glorified One. In this too Christ meant him to be a pattern, that we might learn that, just in the measure in which the heavenliness of Christ and His gifts, the unworldliness of the powers that work for salvation, are known and believed, will prayer become the spontaneous rising of the heart to the only source of its life. Let us see what we know of Paul.

Paul's Habits of Prayer

These are revealed almost unconsciously.

Rom. 1:9: God is my witness, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers. For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established.

Rom. 10:1, 9:2, 3: My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they may be saved; I have great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart; for I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren

1 Cor. 1:4: I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ.

2 Cor. 6:4, 6: Approving ourselves as the ministers of Christ, in watchings, in fastings.

Gal. 4:19: My little children, of whom I travail in birth again till Christ be formed in you.

Eph. 1:16: I cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers.

Eph. 3:14: I bow my knees to the Father, that He would grant you to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man.

Phil. 1: 3, 4, 8, 9: I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy. For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ.

Col. 1:3, 9: We give thanks to God, praying always for you. For this cause also, since the day we heard it, we do not cease to pray for you

Col. 2:1: I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh.

1 Thess. 1:2: We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers.

1 Thess. 3:9: Night and day praying exceedingly that we might perfect that which is lacking in your faith.

2 Thess. 1:3: We are bound to thank God always for you. Wherefore also we always pray for you.

2 Tim. 1:3: I thank God, that without ceasing I have remembrance of you night and day.

Philem. 1:4: I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers.

These passages taken together give us the picture of a man whose words, "Pray without ceasing," were simply the expression of his daily life. He had such a sense of the insufficiency of simple conversion; of the need of the grace and the power of heaven being brought down for the young converts in prayer; of the need of much and unceasing prayer, day and night, to bring it down; of the certainty that prayer would bring it down; that his life was continual and most definite prayer. He had such a sense that everything must come from above, and such a faith that it would come in answer to prayer, that prayer was neither a duty nor a burden, but the natural turning of the heart to the only place whence it could possibly obtain what it sought for others.

The Contents of Paul's Prayers

It is of as much importance to know what Paul prayed, as how frequently and earnestly he did so. Intercession is a spiritual work. Our confidence in it will depend much on our knowing that we ask according to the will of God. The more distinctly we ask heavenly things, which we feel at once God alone can bestow, which we are sure He will bestow, the more direct and urgent will our appeal be to God alone. The more impossible the things are that we seek, the more we will turn from all human work to prayer and to God alone.

In the Epistles, in addition to expressions in which he speaks of his praying, we have a number of distinct prayers in which Paul gives utterance to his heart's desire for those to whom he writes. In these we see that his first desire was always that they might be established in the Christian life. Much as he praised God when he heard of conversion, he knew how feeble the young converts were, and how for their establishing nothing would avail without the grace of the Spirit prayed down. If we notice some of the principal of these prayers we shall see what he asked and obtained.

Take the two prayers in Ephesians—the one for light, the other for strength. In the former (1:15), he prays for the Spirit of wisdom to enlighten them to know what their calling was, what their inheritance, what the mighty power of God working in them. Spiritual enlightenment and knowledge was their great need, to be obtained for them by prayer. In the latter (3:15) he asks that the power they had been led to see in Christ, might work in them, and they be strengthened with Divine might, so as to have the indwelling Christ, and the love that passes knowledge, and the fullness of God actually come on them. These were things that could only come direct from heaven; these were things he asked and expected. If we want to learn Paul's art of intercession, we must ask nothing less for believers in our days.

Look at the prayer in Philippians 1:9-11. There, too, it is first for spiritual knowledge; then comes a blameless life, and then a fruitful life to the glory of God. So also in the beautiful prayer in Colossians 1:9-11. First, spiritual knowledge and understanding of God's will, then the strengthening with all might to all patience and joy.

Or take the two prayers in 1 Thessalonians (3:12, 13, and 5:23). The one: "God so increase your love to one another, that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness." The other: "God sanctify you wholly, and preserve you blameless." The very words are so high that we hardly understand, still less believe, still less experience what they mean. Paul so lived in the heavenly world, he was so at home in the holiness and omnipotence of God and His love, that such prayers were the natural expression of what he knew God could and would do.

"God establish your hearts unblamable in holiness," "God sanctify you wholly"—the man who believes in these things and desires them, will pray for them for others. The prayers are all a proof that he seeks for them the very life of heaven upon earth. No wonder that he is not tempted to trust in any human means, but looks for it from heaven alone. Again I say, the more we take Paul's prayers as our pattern, and make his desires our own for believers for whom we pray, the more will prayer to the God of heaven become as our daily breath.

Paul's Requests For Prayer

These are no less instructive than his own prayers for the saints. They prove that he does not count prayer any special prerogative of an apostle; he calls the humblest and simplest believer to claim his right. They prove that he does not think that only the new converts or feeble Christians need prayer; he himself is, as a member of the body, dependent upon his brethren and their prayers. After he had preached the gospel for twenty years, he still asks for prayer that he may speak as he ought to speak. Not once for all, not for a time, but day by day, and that without ceasing, must grace be sought and brought down from heaven for his work. United, continued waiting on God is to Paul the only hope of the Church. With the Holy Spirit a heavenly life, the life of the Lord in heaven, entered the world; nothing but unbroken communication with heaven can keep it up.

Listen how he asks for prayer, and with what earnestness—Roman 15:30: “I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me; that I may be delivered from them which do not believe in Judea; and may come unto you with joy by the will of God.” How remarkably both prayers were answered: Rom. 15:5, 6,13. The remarkable fact that the Roman world power, which in Pilate with Christ, in Herod with Peter at Philippi, had proved its antagonism to God’s kingdom, all at once becomes Paul’s protector, and secures him a safe convoy to Rome, can only be accounted for by these prayers.

2 Cor. 1:11: In whom we trust that He will yet deliver us, ye also helping together by prayer for us.

Eph. 6:19: Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit for all saints, and for me that I may open my mouth boldly, that therein I may speak boldly as I ought to speak.

Phil. 1:19: I know that this (trouble) shall turn to my salvation, through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Col. 4:2: Continue in prayer, also praying for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, that I may make it manifest as I ought to speak.

1 Thess. 5:25: Brethren, pray for us.

Philem. 22: I trust that through your prayers I shall be given to you.

We saw how Christ prayed, and taught His disciples to pray. We see how Paul prayed, and taught the churches to pray. As the Master, so the servant calls us to believe and to prove that prayer is the power alike of the ministry and the Church. Of his faith we have a summary in these remarkable words concerning something that caused him grief: “This shall turn to my salvation through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.” As much as he looked to his Lord in heaven did he look to his brethren on earth, to secure the supply of that Spirit for him. The Spirit from heaven and prayer on earth were to him, as to the twelve after Pentecost, inseparably linked. We speak often of apostolic zeal and devotion and power—may God give us a revival of apostolic prayer.

Let me once again ask the question: Does the work of intercession take the place in the Church it ought to have? Is it a thing commonly understood in the Lord’s work, that everything depends upon getting from God that “supply of the Spirit of Christ” for and in ourselves that can give our work its real power to bless. This is Christ’s Divine order for all work, His own and that of His servants; this is the order Paul followed: first come every day, as having nothing, and receive from God “the supply of the Spirit” in intercession —then go and impart what has come to thee from heaven.

In all His instructions, our Lord Jesus spoke much oftener to His disciples about their praying than their preaching. In the farewell discourse, He said little about preaching, but much about the Holy Spirit, and their asking whatsoever they would in His Name. If we are to return to this life of the first apostles and of Paul, and really accept the truth every day— my first work, my only strength is intercession, to secure the power of God on the souls entrusted to me—we must have the courage to confess past sin, and to believe that there is deliverance. To break through old habits, to resist the clamor of pressing duties that have always had their way, to make every other call subordinate to this one, whether others approve or not, will not be easy at first. But the men or women who are faithful will not only have a reward themselves, but become benefactors to their brethren. “Thou shalt be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of paths to dwell in.”

But is it really possible? Can it indeed be that those who have never been able to face, much less to overcome the difficulty, can yet become mighty in prayer? Tell me, was it really possible for Jacob to become Israel—a prince who prevailed with God? It was. The things that are impossible with men are possible with God.

Have you not in very deed received from the Father, as the great fruit of Christ's redemption, the spirit of supplication, the spirit of intercession? Just pause and think what that means. And will you still doubt whether God is able to make you "strivers with God," princes who prevail with Him? Oh, let us banish all fear, and in faith claim the grace for which we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, the grace of supplication, the grace of intercession.

Let us quietly, perseveringly believe that He lives in us, and will enable us to do our work. Let us in faith not fear to accept and yield to the great truth that intercession, as it is the great work of the King on the throne, is the great work of His servants on earth. We have the Holy Spirit, who brings the Christ-life into our hearts, to fit us for this work. Let us at once begin and stir up the gift within us. As we set aside each day our time for intercession, and count upon the Spirit's enabling power, the confidence will grow that we can, in our measure, follow Paul even as he followed Christ.