

THE POWER OF PRAYER

Ephesians 6:18-20

Bob O'Shea arrived at our Stephen Ministry meeting and asked, "Would you guys like to hear about a miracle that occurred today?" We said, "Sure!" and Bob related this story: A man is arrested for a domestic dispute and is taken to the Crawford County jail, where Bob serves as a parole officer. This man is a good man, a Christian, who does something stupid when his temper gets the best of him. His brother-in-law lives in a trailer next to his. He thinks his brother-in-law's trailer is too close to their property line and it annoys him. It is in fact over the line. This is a source of tension between this man and his wife and they quarrel over it often.

One evening they have a particularly heated argument over this. As they argue, their son arrives to go and shoot target practice with his dad. The man grabs his rifle and stomps out of the trailer, hollering back and forth with his wife. As he steps from his trailer, he's confronted once again with his brother-in-law's trailer. In his anger, he takes his rifle and blasts the side of it. No one is hurt, but the cops are called and he's thrown into jail.

While in the jail, some inmates gather for prayer, He asks to join them. As they gather, a guard notices them and asks what they are up to. The man explains that he's been laid off but has just been called back to work. He has a few days to report back to work and if he doesn't show up, he'll lose his job. But, he won't get out of jail in time. Shortly afterward this conversation, the guard bumps into Bob O'Shea and tells him of this man's predicament. Bob knows this man and moves in his behalf. Bob phones the

magistrate who sentenced the man and explains his predicament and potential job loss. Bob asks if he can be released and make up his remaining time on weekends. The magistrates and Bob goes and tells the man.

When he hears the news he's overjoyed of course, but not just because of his release. He tells Bob that earlier that day he and other inmates had been praying for that very thing before they were interrupted by a guard. He never he'd get an answer to his prayer that fast! Bob said it sent chills down his spine to think that unbeknownst to any of them, god used the guard, Bob, and the magistrate to answer prayer. There is power in prayer.

Prayer has done miraculous things in Korea. During the time of the Korean War, the population of Korea was 95% Buddhist and 5% Christian. Today it is 30% Christian, and it is estimated the 50% of the residents are first generation Christians. There are now more Presbyterians in Korea than in the USA. Their growth is the result of their practice of prayer.

Don Dunkerley reports that he attended a Friday night prayer meeting in a church in Seoul. When he arrived the 25,000 seat sanctuary was filled and overflow rooms were filling. The prayer meeting lasted all night. Almost all Korean Protestant churches in Korea have 5:00 am daily prayer meeting and Friday evening meetings.

When I was a pastor in Lincoln, NE, the presbytery asked me to assist a group of Korean Presbyterians who were organizing a congregation there. Most of them were connected the U. of NE as students or professors. Their pastor and session met every morning at 5:30 am for

prayer, before returning home for a family breakfast and then off to work. Prayer came first. Their congregation grew quickly to 130 members who supported a full-time pastor.

No wonder there is so much talk of prayer in

Ephesians. Readers are energized with its strong words on prayer. In chapter one, Paul prays at length for the congregation. He does so again in chapter three. And, he concludes the main body of his letter with a call for prayer in today's passage. Words for prayer in one form or another occur four times in verse 18 and once in verse 20. He asks for their prayers because he knows the power in prayer and how much he needs it to complete his ministry. And, in truth it is needed in all occasions. The Greek word for "all" or "every" occurs four times in verse 18. It means we should pray a variety of prayers: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication and, it says, we should persevere in prayer.

Jesus prayed and his ministry was empowered by the Holy Spirit. Mark reports, *"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went to a secluded place, where he prayed."* His apostles observed how praying brought Jesus strength, stability, and power to his words and deeds. So, they asked him to teach them to pray. He gave them the Lord's Prayer as an example.

The apostles learned their prayer lesson well, for prayer was the life-force of their mission. Chapter one of Acts lists the apostles and says, *"They all joined together constantly in prayer."* Their mission succeeded in spite of overwhelming odds against it. Christianity spread quickly. Acts reports that new believers *"devoted themselves to the*

apostles' teaching and to the fellowship and to the (Lord's Supper) and to prayer."

Prayer opens us to the Holy Spirit. It is an open invitation for the Spirit to influence our wills and thinking. The Holy Spirit is known as the "shy" person of the Trinity. He does not intrude upon us; he awaits an invitation to enter our lives. When we pray, we invite him in, we let him intercede for us in our praying. Paul told the Romans (8:26) *"the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes... the Spirit intercedes for (us) according to the will of God."* This is what our passage means when it instructs us to *"pray in the Spirit at all times in every (kind) of prayer and supplication."* We may not know what is needed or how to express our thoughts and feelings, but the Spirit does, and he translates our prayers before the Father for God's glory and our blessing.

The Bible gives more counsel to pray and how to pray when we do so. It says:

1. Pray continuously – Paul counseled the Thessalonians to *"pray without ceasing"* and Jesus told a parable to the effect that they always ought to *"pray and not lose heart."*
2. Pray in secret – Jesus said, *"When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."*
3. Pray simply – Jesus said, *"When you pray do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words."* Jesus gave the Lord's Prayer as an illustration of simple

prayer. *“Give us our daily bread...Forgive us our debts...Deliver us from evil.”*

When prayers are constant, secret, and simple, and offered in the Spirit, there is power in prayer.

Randolph Byrd, an M.D. for San Francisco conducted an experiment to measure the effect of intercessory prayer on patients in a hospital coronary care unit. Over period of ten months patients were divided into blind groups. One group was prayed for by committed and religiously active Protestants and Catholics. Each intercessor was randomly assigned three to seven patients. The patients knew the experiment was being conducted but they did not know which group they were in. The intercessors received the patients' first name, diagnosis, and general condition, along with updates. Praying was done outside the hospital on a daily basis until the patient was discharged. The control group which was prayed for had fewer complications, required less medication, and had better results than the others for whom there was no prayer. Dr. Byrd concluded: “Based on these data there seemed to be an effect and that effect is presumed to be beneficial.”

N.T. Wright writes, “Prayer remains a mystery at one level. Nobody quite knows how it works and not knowing seems to be part of the point. But it remains a deeply practical thing to do.” Anglican Arch Bishop William Temple once said, “Whatever else someone might say about whether or not prayer works, I find that more “coincidences” happen when I pray than when I do not.” Paul would agree. So would I. It has happened too often in my life not to recognize it. I don't mean to say things always work according to my prayers, but many times I

have discovered my prayers were answered in ways I would have never foreseen.

Tennyson wrote:

More things are wrought by prayer
than this world dreams of.
Wherefore let your voice rise
like a fountain day and night.

It is in this very spirit that Ephesians calls us to “*pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and request. With this in mind be alert and always keep on praying...*” **Why? There is power in prayer.**

SOURCES:

1. Walter L. Liefeld, *Ephesians*, IVP, p. 165-168.
2. *Pulpit Digest*
3. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone, the Prison Letters*, SPCK, p. 77-79.
4. reNEWS, Presbyterians for Renewal.