

The Line of Prayer

by John Piper

God wants us to pray earnestly and corporately so that he can be glorified through our thanksgiving and praise.

Duration: 34:50

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:8

Topics: "Corporate Prayer", "Divine Deliverance"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of corporate prayer and how it can lead to God's help and deliverance. The sermon focuses on the example of the apostle Paul, who faced adversity and imprisonment but was helped through the prayers of the Corinthians. The speaker emphasizes that when prayers are answered, it should lead to praise and thanksgiving to God, as it glorifies Him. The sermon also mentions the implied stages in the line of prayer, highlighting the need for reliance on God and trust in His deliverance.

Transcript

The thing that I want to accomplish this morning, by the help of God's Spirit and His Word, is to stir you up to pray more earnestly for me as your pastor, for Glenn Ogren as he comes, and for the whole ministry here at Bethlehem Baptist Church as we strive with the strength that God supplies to enlarge and to purify the body of Christ in this place. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watch over the city, those who watch it stay awake in vain.

Which means that we can work our heads off and have meeting after meeting after meeting, and go through all the motions of worship, and if God isn't in it, it's nothing. And there are few things that are more fearful to me than the specter of a local church going on the momentum of tradition and habit when the power has been severed. Like people sitting in a train, enjoying the scenery, but coasting to a stop in the desert because the locomotive has been unhitched and has disappeared over the horizon.

Earnest and heartfelt prayer is the means by which we get coupled up with that locomotive of God's power, isn't it? And didn't Jesus say, I am the vine, you are the branches, he who abides in me stays hooked up to the locomotive and I in him, he it is that will bear much fruit. But oh, how easily a church can deceive itself that even when it's not praying earnestly, nevertheless, all of its activity is something. Jesus says, without me, you can do nothing.

It is nothing. And how grateful I am that Bethlehem is not severed from her power. The locomotive is hitched in, the sap is flowing, and I have a great hope today that you will be stirred up to pursue this even more.

And great reason to believe that it will not be said of us what Paul said to one of the groups at Colossae, they are not holding fast to the head from whom the whole body nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments grows with a growth that is from God. If we don't hold to the head, no life and prayer is the holding to the head, isn't it? So I want to urge you and stir you up that there be a spreading flame of prayer at Bethlehem Baptist Church this week and in the whole year to come. And not only private prayer alone in your closet, like Jesus said at home, but also public and corporate prayer.

And I hope that one of the main things I can do today is give you a compelling reason why we must pray that way, too. And oh, may God teach us to pray and put it in our hearts to pray together this week, Wednesday night as we gather together and Thursday night in these five homes. I think it will make a world of difference.

History proves, doesn't it, that revival or the stirring up of spiritual life and power and joy and worship and zeal for outreach and the healing of animosities all comes when God pours a burden on a congregation for group prayer. It's all through history. When God pours out a burden on a congregation for group prayer, things change.

And that's what I want to see happen, reaching out to God in groups. May he give us that burden. Now, the text this morning is Second Corinthians chapter one, verses eight through eleven, especially verse eleven.

But we have some important things to say about verses eight through ten as well. Paul says first that an unbearable experience has happened to him. God has taught him something in it, and now he has a great anticipation for something.

Let's read it again. We do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia, for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself, why we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was and here's the purpose of God in Paul's suffering.

That was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from so deadly apparel and he will deliver us on him. We have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

And then this is the verse we're going to look at in a little bit. You also must help us by prayer so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted to us in answer to many prayers. Now, first, verses nine and ten in verses nine and ten, two purposes.

Are in view, two purposes that God has in bringing Paul to the point of unbearable distress. First, verse nine, that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. In other words, God brought Paul to the brink of death so that there was no more hope in anything that this life could offer.

And he only could have hope in one place. The God who raises the dead after they die. God wanted Paul to despair of everything this world could offer and have hope in one thing.

God alone suffering, therefore, I conclude, is intended by God to bring to our attention and make us feel what is always true, namely that we are very finite creatures, absolutely dependent on God for absolutely

everything. God's will is that we know it, feel it and act like it. And if he must, he will give us unbearable circumstances.

I expect them as a pastor because I can't put myself above the great apostle. That's the first purpose that God has in these verses. Second, verse 10, he delivered us.

Oh, he didn't let him die. He delivered us from so deadly apparel and he will deliver us on him. We have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

Now, in Paul's case, God had a second purpose, therefore, namely, after he had taught him to die. He saved him from death that he would glorify him as one who could deliver from death, having taught Paul that he doesn't need to be delivered from death in order to have hope. He delivered him from death to give him hope for ministry.

Evidently, God wasn't through with Paul and therefore Paul had hope. Well, perhaps he will go on delivering me then, even though he promises me affliction in every city. He has a ministry for me.

He'll save me for it. Now, there's a great lesson for us to be learned from these two verses. First of all, God always wants to glorify himself in one of these two ways or both.

He wants to glorify himself, first of all, in our adversity by forcing us, if he can, through our experience to rely on him alone, trust on him alone, get our joy and our hope from him alone. That's clear, isn't it? From verse nine, adversity by its very nature is the taking away of something that we've we've enjoyed, we've rested on, we've gotten pleasure from. He knocks it out from under us.

I don't know what it was for Paul. Probably opponents there in Ephesus who were always after him, plotting both for his life and to ruin his ministry, trying to corrupt his doctrine. He had it all the time.

And God reveals to him, it's that you might trust me, Paul. And his purpose for us in adversity is not that we get angry. We can respond in one of two ways.

We can say if God has taken away what makes me happy, he's mean and I'm angry at him. Or we can respond by saying he has taken away what I like in this earth. What can I do but fall on him all the more heavily? That's the intention that God has in all our suffering.

God's main purpose in adversity is that we stop trusting in ourselves or any man or any human circumstance and start trusting in him. Listen to this litany through the Old Testament. Lest we think this is just news from the new.

Jeremiah 17, 5. Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes the flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the Lord. Psalm 146, 3. Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man in whom there is no hope. Isaiah 2, 22.

Turn away from man in whose nostrils is breath. For what account is he? Psalm 33, 16. A king is not saved by his great army.

A warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The warhorse is vain, a vain hope of victory. And by its great might, it cannot save.

Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his. Steadfast love. And then one more.

Proverbs 21, 31. The horse is made ready for the battle. But the victory belongs to the Lord.

The whole Bible wants to teach us the lesson of second Corinthians chapter one, verse nine. Don't hope in man or anything that man can offer you yourself or another hope in God. If we trust him like that, he will be glorified.

And that's one of his great purposes. But the second half of his great purpose and the second half of the lesson that we can get from this is that God often glorifies himself by delivering those whom he has taught to die. God does not always let us go into death when we approach death.

He lets us learn the lesson to die in faith, and then he brings us back and gives us more life. Five seconds before that VW van hit the front of the bus in which my mother was killed, my father, who was sitting in the front seat beside her of the bus, stood up, turned around to address the touring group in the bus. And then the van hit and the lumber that was on top of the van came like rockets through the front window, killed my mother instantly, but didn't kill my dad.

Ten days later, when I was in the ambulance with him riding back between Atlanta and Greenville, he said, What must God want from me? What purpose must he have for me? Five seconds. I stood up five seconds. Why me? And the answer is very clear.

He was through with my mother's ministry. It was over. The purpose had been fulfilled and he took her away.

He wasn't through with daddy and he's not through yet. So he delivered him out of such a great adversity, though he was seriously injured. And he will go on delivering him.

I think we can say from all such deadly perils until his ministry is finished. I'll give you one more illustration of how that's happened. I've had great cause to praise the Lord because of how he has cared for my dad, whom I pray for every day and whom my mother taught me to pray for ever since I was a teeny little tot every day for his safety.

He travels all over the country preaching and evangelistic services and flies thousands and thousands of miles every year and drives and lives in all kinds of crazy places. One time he was in a restaurant. This is about two or three years ago, all by himself in a strange town, eating alone, and all of a sudden sucked a piece of gristle down into his windpipe and it lodged solid and he could not breathe at all.

And there was nobody around that he knew at all. What would you do? He could not make a sound. Without thinking, he just headed for the restroom, would have been all over if he'd made it to the restroom.

And a complete stranger, just as he entered the door, stood up from his table and gave him a whack on the middle of the back. And it came out and he fell and faint on the bathroom floor, and when he recovered, man was gone and and he called me, he called me on the phone and he just he just he said again the same thing he said in the ambulance. What must God have for me to do? And that's the right thing to say.

God will deliver us as long as he has a purpose for us and he will glorify himself. And I've praised God for how he's delivered my dad from many, many adverse circumstances. Now, that's what Paul wanted to say in verses nine and 10 of Second Corinthians one.

He turns now, having stated God's purpose in this terrible adversity that he had gone through to verse 11. And here, even though he has great hope that God will deliver him from peril, he says you must help us by prayer so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted to us in answer to many prayers. Now, there is a what I call a line of prayer in this, and that's what you see drawn on the inside page of your bullet, because I think if you can see what I see in this line of prayer, it'll change your life.

It'll change the way you pray, the way you think about prayer. The more I think about this line of prayer, the more insights it opens for me. And I want to share some of those with you this morning because they've been so helpful to me.

That's a hard verse. I noticed Glenn this morning, just like I had trouble reading verse 11. He had to stop and make sure he had it just right because it's a very complex sentence.

I had to read verse 11 again and again, and I could not get the gist of verse 11 until I drew it on paper. And that's what you see there on that page. Now, follow with me the line of prayer.

Keep one eye on the text, one eye on the line and both ears on me. The line of prayer begins with Paul and he feels a need. That's where prayer begins.

His need was probably, oh, how I need to rely on God more. Oh, how I need to trust God for deliverance from all my adversaries more. So what does he do? He sends out a line of prayer.

Help me horizontally to the Corinthians. Help me by prayer. And that's stage one in the line of prayer.

Then the line of prayer curves up through the heart of the Corinthians as they hear the plea and they look up to God and pray that God will, in fact, answer their prayers for Paul's deliverance and for his faith. And that stage to the prayers of the Corinthians heading up to God. Then the line of prayer enters the heart of God who is there listening, waiting for the prayers of his people.

And in response to the prayers of the many Corinthians, God sends down a gift or a blessing, as the text says, to Paul. What blessing? Greater faith in God, greater dependence on him alone and deliverance from his adversaries. And that's stage three in the line of prayer.

Help us by prayer. Stage one. God help Paul.

Stage two. God's answer. Stage three.

Now, just as many people heard the plea of Paul to help through prayer, so many people now see the answer to the prayers as they look. Look, Paul got out. He got out of the Philippian jail.

He got away from Ephesus. He made it all the way through Berea and Thessalonica. He's coming down here to us.

He's going to make it all the way to Jerusalem with that money. He may make it to Rome to the ends of the earth and preach to the emperor. Praise God.

And that's line four. They see they see the answer to prayer and that curves up through their heart in praises and thanksgiving through many people back to God. And that's stage five in the line of prayer, and that's where the text stops.

But I've added a little dotted line there. Because I think that there is something implied in the text that's not explicit, that is just a choice truth that I don't want to leave out. Namely, if Paul chose to motivate the Corinthians to pray for him by pointing out that it would abound in many thanksgivings to God, then it must be a great delight to Paul to think about God getting so many thanks.

And if it's a great delight to Paul to see God being thanked, then that little dotted line that comes down from God is joy coming back into the heart of Paul as he sees God being thanked in response to many prayers or the answer to many prayers. So that's stage six that I've added. In fact, I could go on adding stage seven because God gets delight in Paul's delight and Paul gets delight in God's delight in his delight.

And it's just a great spiral on up into infinite joy someday when there's no more sin to clutter up that spiral. That's the line of prayer. Let me sum it up just briefly.

Paul has a great need and he feels that he knows he's coming into adversity. He said in Acts 20, verse 23, the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that afflictions and imprisonments await me. He needs help.

Help me, Corinthians. They hear the word. God help Paul.

God looks down. I hear the prayer. Here's the help, Paul.

Paul is helped. He's delivered. He's free.

He's preaching. He's full of faith. Who sees it? Lots of people see it.

What do they do? Praise God. God has responded to our prayers and the thanks go back to God and he's glorified. That's the line of prayer.

That's what ought to be happening in this church again and again and again. And there are more lessons in this than I can begin to say this morning. But I want to mention two, two lessons from the line of prayer.

The first is this. If you're like me, you've probably asked yourself why it is that corporate prayer is important. Why pray in groups? Why pray publicly? Why not just close the door? Like Jesus said, we should many times and pray alone.

Why does Paul not simply pray? God save me from the enemies. God fill me with faith and not write letters and tell other people to pray for him. Doesn't he think God can answer his prayer? Is he lacking in faith? Are we weak in faith when we ask many people to pray for something? That's the kind of question I came to this text with.

And I think the text gives a tremendous answer to why corporate and public prayer is so important. Why might God be more inclined to answer the prayers of many rather than the prayers of one? That's my question. And I think the answer begins like this.

According to our text, the thing that's different when many people pray, not just many prayers, is that the stage is being set for lots and lots and lots of thanks. The more people that are earnestly praying for some

blessing from God, the more thanksgiving will ascend to God when that blessing comes. Paul's argument is very simply this.

You must help me by prayer so that many will give thanks when the prayers of many are answered. The reason for praying at all is so God might be thanked when blessings come. Come and God loves to be thanked.

God loves to be thanked. That's the basic premise here for why this prayer becomes so effective. He loves to be acknowledged and praised as the giver of all good gifts.

Therefore, when we urge when I urge you, 400 people say when I urge you to pray for some need, many people, I'm creating a situation in which the provision of that need will result in many, many, many thanksgivings more than if each of us was praying privately. And therefore, we tap into a tremendous incentive on God's part because God loves to glorify himself by doing what he must do to get as many thanks as possible. And that means answering the prayers of many people.

God loves to be thanked by many. And therefore, there is a power in church wide prayer, because the more people there are praying for the spiritual life of our church, the more thanksgiving will ascend when God gives it. Now, the same reasoning which comes straight out of Second Corinthians one, eleven, the same reasoning also shows that we should not only pray in in large numbers, but that we should get together in groups to pray.

I'll try to show you how that follows. Picture two possibilities. One would be a dozen people.

Privately in their homes, praying for the release of Paul, say, from jail in Philippi. OK. They pray.

God answers, delivers Paul. They get word of it. They give thanks.

God is honored. Great. But suppose that those dozen or so people met together.

In a group, in a room, in a living room there in Philippi, just like the saints did in Acts 12 to pray for Peter's release when he was in jail. Suppose they got together and prayed in the fervor of each other's prayer, kindled each other's fervor up to God. God released Paul miraculously through this earthquake and they hear about it.

Then what would happen? The praises and the thanks would ascend. And is it not human nature? You see, if this isn't true to your own experience, is it not human nature to feel gratitude more intensely when somebody you love is sharing the experience with you? Is that not human nature to feel the joy of gratitude more intensely when someone you love is feeling it together with you? When you and I experience a blessing that we've asked for together, your thanksgiving deepens and heightens my thanksgiving because it works like this. Now, this is true for me, and I think it's it's human nature.

When the answer comes, I see the blessing coming from God. I see it and I'm glad I rejoice. But then I look down and I I see it reflected in all your faces, reflected and magnified.

And my joy, therefore, is compounded and my thanksgiving is greater. And God loves heightened and deepened thanksgiving, and therefore he wants us to meet in groups to pray, and therefore we are setting ourselves up for tremendous spiritual blessing in this church when we gather in groups to seek God's blessing on our church. I hope many of you will come to those prayer meetings Thursday night and prove

this truth for the year ahead.

There are so many things we need to pray about. And let me close with one, and this is my second lesson that I get from verse 11. Paul needed help as a minister of the gospel.

And he sought it from Corinthians, from men. But he sought it in this way. He said, help me by asking God to help me.

He had learned his lesson well, hadn't he? Namely, put not your trust in men. What good are men? Well, men can pray. What can you ask a man to do for you? You can ask a man to ask God to do something for you, because nothing is impossible with God.

And that's what Paul does. He turns to the men, the women at Corinth and says, you humans, you help me. What can they do? Pray for me that God will send down blessing upon me.

And that's what I want to say. You must help me as the pastor of this church by prayer and not just alone, but in groups, or I cannot make it. And that goes for Glenn Ogren, too.

I have just begun to feel the weight of bearing the responsibility for the spiritual welfare of this church. I think I've only begun to taste what it means to carry that load. In Second Corinthians, chapter 11, Paul listed off all his hardships as an apostle, and then he said in verse 28, something with tremendous feeling that must have made those churches pray hard for him.

And I hope it does you for me. He said in Second Corinthians 11, 28, apart from all the other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches share that with me. Do you feel anxious for our church? And its spiritual life, there was a Scottish minister a couple of centuries ago named John Welch, who was very famous for his prayer life.

John Welch used to keep a blanket on his bed at night so that when he crawled out of bed in the middle of night to pray, he could wrap it around him and his wife would sometimes find him on the floor weeping in the middle of the night. And when she complained, he said, oh, woman, I have the souls of 3000 people to answer for, and I know not how it is with many of them. Would you please resolve to pray for me in 1981? I know not how it is with many of you pray that I might rely more on God and less on men pray that I might be delivered from all temptations of every sort, pray that I might do the work of an evangelist and see hundreds one to Christ.

Pray that I might have vision for our future so that I can know which way to point us and pray that I might hear the word of God day after day and deliver it to you with life changing power so that we just don't play games here at Bethlehem. And I promise to pray for you. And I think if we keep that covenant.

God will do something very great. It says it is beyond our imagination. What might he works of salvation and harmony and growth God may perform at Bethlehem Baptist Church in 1981 if we gather in his name and plead for his power.

Let's close in prayer. Lord, again and again and again in history, here and there, from age to age, you have looked with favor on some churches. And have chosen, apart from any human agency, to pour out a spirit of prayer upon those churches so that in response to many, many prayers, you might bless that church with spiritual life and fire and ministry that many thanksgivings might ascend to you and you be glorified.

And in as much as it lies within me, oh, God, I cry to you, do it for Bethlehem in 1981. Lord, I hear the sound of a distant wind, I see a small cloud on the horizon, and I believe, oh, God, if we would pray like Elijah, there would come down a thunderstorm of blessing and life and outreach that would make this whole area of the city different and leave none of us untouched. Perform it, I pray, according to your great mercy.

In Jesus name. Amen.

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