

Persevering Prayer

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. This morning we come to the end of our series on prayer and that's a dangerous place to be.

It's dangerous because if you're anything like me, a teaching series on prayer fires you up for a time. Then, as prayer goes off the agenda, it can start to go off the boil in our life as well. It's different things come along, distract us, discourage us, disappoint us. So I think it's fantastic that this morning we're dealing with possibly the most challenging of all our topics in this series, persevering prayer, why we need to stay the course in prayer.

So let's pray as we begin. Father, we come to you today thankful for all that you have taught us about prayer, but knowing that there's always the danger that we might lose our fire in prayer. Please mould us and make us this morning into people that persevere in prayer, teaching us afresh through your word by your spirit. We pray this that we might glorify you in the name of your son.

[1 : 23] Amen. Over the last month or so, God really has been giving me a new passion for prayer. I've been praying a number of times a day with just great honesty and fervency, with focus.

I've had a deeper realisation of the partnership that we have, that I have with God and his work in the world. I've been really bold in bringing my requests to God, but also asking him to shape the requests that I bring according to his will.

Phil and I have consciously been stopping to pray before making difficult decisions or tackling difficult issues or difficult people. And the wonderful thing is that God has been answering my prayers.

Not huge dramatic stuff, but stuff that's been really encouraging to me. For example, last weekend was the Victorian Christian Youth Convention and God answered our prayers just wonderfully in how many young people came and how they responded to God's word.

But also for me, I had to deal with a couple of difficult issues with some of the volunteers and I was pretty stressed about that. And God provided new ways that I wouldn't have thought possible for those things to be dealt with and sensitivity for me.

[2 : 46] And it was just really clearly answered to prayer. Everything was going along great and I thought, this is fantastic, I'm going to be able to get up there on Sunday morning and just speak with real confidence about prayer.

And then something happened. I'd been devoting myself to prayer just as I thought I had before. And suddenly, it seemed like God wasn't answering. Whereas I'd been hearing from him really personally every time I opened up the scriptures, I started to read and it just seemed like words on a page.

Whereas I'd been finding that he'd been buoying me up and giving me strength and joy as I served him, I suddenly felt depressed, grumpy, cross at him, others.

God just seemed silent. And my passion for prayer started to melt away. So what did I do, friends? How did I deal with this setback? Did I push through? Well, I'm ashamed to say that no, I didn't. I crossed my arms and I stopped praying.

[4 : 00] I gave up. I sat in my room and I thought, God, I don't know what you're doing, but I'm just going to wait this out. I'm just going to wait till I get back on an even keel, you know, till I'm feeling really faith-filled and passionate again.

And then I'll start praying. But at the moment, God, it just seems like there's no point. Well, I tell you what, that was a wake-up call for a girl who was about to preach on persevering in prayer.

The thing is, it's easy to pray when you're seeing answers, but that's not perseverance in prayer. When everything was going great, I felt like I had such strong faith in God's ability to answer my prayers, in his willingness to answer my prayers.

But the fact was, I wasn't even walking by faith. I was walking by sight. I was seeing God work right in front of my face. That was the motivation for me. But when those answers are suddenly gone, which I think happens for all of us, for a season in God's wisdom, that's when true faith and perseverance needed to kick in.

That's when the real passion for prayer ought to have begun in my life. Now, clearly I've worked through these issues a bit and you'll be glad to know that I don't come up here this morning as a prayerless preacher.

[5 : 27] It took a few days, but God got me back on track through some wise people and through his word. But if we're honest, I wonder how many of us would admit that we've been there or somewhere pretty similar.

When we don't see answers to our prayer, when we don't have that vending machine experience of kind of putting the prayer in, pushing the button and, you know, outcoming the answer right away, it's hard to persevere.

And the great saints of the church will testify that when they do see answers, it's often, usually, been after weeks or months or even years of praying.

And many of us, even last night or this morning even, will have found ourselves praying the same thing as we prayed the night before and the night before that.

Lord, please save my children, save my parents, my spouse. Please bring healing. Please bring a job. The list could go on.

[6 : 34] And not a few of us may have thought, why do I have to keep praying the same thing every day? Doesn't God hear me?

Well, it seems to be a fair question to me. I mean, the Bible says that God knows what we need before we ask him. Jesus says, whatever we ask in his name, he will give to us.

Plus, didn't he say that thing about not babbling on as the pagans do, not trying to heap up empty phrases in thinking that that's what will make us heard by God? If we have confidence that God will hear our prayer, because we know it says in 1 John that he hears us when we pray according to his will, then oughtn't we simply be able to pray once, leave our request with God and trust that in his goodness, he's dealing with that request as he knows best in his sovereign wisdom according to the no, slow, grow or go scheme that Paul talked about a few weeks ago.

And if that's baffling to you, I suggest you get the CD. The fact is that although God knows exactly what we need and he desires passionately to answer us, he longs for us to persevere in prayer. He wants us to stay the course as praying disciples. In his word, he gives us a number of reasons why and that's what we're going to have a look at this morning.

[8 : 11] Clearly, the first reason we need to persevere in prayer is that God simply tells us to. It's his plan and his will for us that we pray consistently, that we are devoted to prayer, the scriptures say, that we keep awake and alert in it.

In Luke 18, Jesus used the story about a widow and an unjust judge to make the point that disciples ought always to pray and not lose heart.

That's what faithful disciples look like to Jesus. They're always praying. In Ephesians 6 verse 18, the apostle Paul says, pray in the spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.

To that end, keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. In Romans 12 verse 12, he says, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

For the apostle Paul, persevering prayer was a non-negotiable for the obedient believer. It was a command from God. But God's commands to us are also the things that are best for us, aren't they?

[9 : 28] They're not empty words. God's commands to us are always attached to God's blessing. They're the means of him giving his goodness to us.

And persevering prayer is no different. It's not simply a command. It's actually the type of prayer that God promises to answer. We can look at Luke chapter 11 to see this.

Luke chapter 11, Jesus is praying and the disciples are so moved by what they see, so moved by the fervent and committed prayer that Jesus is engaged in that they say, Lord, teach us to pray. In brackets like that. Wow. So Jesus teaches them the Lord's prayer. And immediately afterwards, he tells them a parable, a story about a host who sought help from a neighbor at an inconvenient time.

I'll read it to you. Luke 11, starting at verse 5. And Jesus said to them, suppose one of you has a friend and you go to him at midnight and say to him, friend, lend me three loaves of bread for a friend of mine has arrived and I have nothing to set before him.

[10:37] And he answers from within, do not bother me. The door has already been locked and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything. I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence, he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

So what is the point of Jesus telling this story in this context? Certainly not to teach that God is at all like the unwilling neighbor who didn't want to disturb his kids who were sleeping around him by getting up.

No. God is always awake, always alert, always willing to give good gifts to his children. Jesus goes on to say that in verse 13 of Luke chapter 11. But the point is, in teaching the disciples about prayer, Jesus is not teaching them about a once-off bending machine prayer that gets results every time all your money back.

He wants them to know that they will have to keep on praying in that way because it will be persistent prayer that brings results.

Then Jesus goes on to say these words that are very familiar to many of us. So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you. Search and you will find.

[12:01] Knock and the door will be opened for you. It's easy for us to be confused when we hear these words because it does sound like Jesus is saying, well, as soon as and every time you knock, God will answer.

But Jesus is not actually giving a promise that applies for once-off prayer here, although in God's mercy it so often does. He is specifically giving a promise for persistent prayer.

Notice that the saying is prefaced with a so. It flows directly from the point of the parable. God will certainly give you what you ask when you persist in asking.

So, ask, search, knock. And these three words, ask, search, knock, are present continuous imperatives.

That is, a better translation for us in English would be, keep on asking, keep on searching, keep on knocking. So, Jesus is actually giving us here a promise that persistent, persevering prayer is the prayer that God answers.

[13:16] So, God not only tells or commands us to persevere in prayer, he promises that persevering prayer is the prayer that gets results. furthermore, he gives us an unshakable motivation to pray.

Unlike my situation, our motivation to pray is not to be based on whether we see answers or not, even though we know that persevering prayer does get answers.

But our motivation is to come from our understanding of God's character and God's capacity to answer. That is God's love for us, his character and his powerful ability to do all things, his capacity. We're not to look at our circumstances for motivation to persevere in prayer. We're to look at God. That's what I needed to do last week as I sat in the doldrums.

I needed to take my eyes off what was happening inside me and around me and I needed to fix my eyes in faith upon the one who can clearly do anything and who clearly loves me more than I can comprehend.

[14:35] That's why Jesus told these frankly strange stories about unwilling friends and unjust judges when he wanted to motivate his disciples to pray. He wanted to throw the spotlight on just how different God's character and capacity was to those who granted the requests in the story.

He wanted his disciples to know who they were bringing their requests to so that when God's timing seemed to be different to theirs, when circumstances looked awful, they didn't start to question God's goodness or his sovereign power and stop praying as a result.

In our limited humanness, there will be times when we have no idea what God is doing with our prayers, but we do have undeniable proof that he is the one to whom we ought to keep bringing them and not lose heart.

And that proof is the historical fact of the death and resurrection of his only son, Jesus Christ, on our behalf. That is the love and power of God that keeps us firm in prayer.

So three reasons to persevere in prayer. It's God's command that we persevere in prayer. It's God's promise that he answers persevering prayer. And three, it is God's character and capacity

that are the basis and motivation for persevering prayer, not our circumstances.

[16 : 21] But I believe that God has three further reasons for wanting his disciples to persevere in prayer. Firstly, by persevering in prayer, we bring God great joy because we bring him great glory.

Perseverance in prayer reminds us and shows the world that we are completely dependent on God for everything in our lives. If we could mechanically shoot off one prayer and know that it would be answered exactly as we expect, when we expect, every time, then we, and not God, start to look like we're in control of things around here.

But there's something about being on your knees day after day for the same stuff that impresses upon the human heart that we are the creature, not the creator.

And God is overjoyed at that. And rather than being bothered when we bring our requests to him, and rather than saying, you know, I do help those that help themselves, and rather than wishing that we were just able to get on with serving him like the mature Christian that we ought to be.

No, God is overjoyed when we come to him over and over again in prayer, because our persevering in prayer shows that we know that he is God and we are not, and that glorifies him.

[17 : 55] Furthermore, when we receive an answer after a significant time of praying, our gratitude to God is greatly heightened, isn't it? Have you ever watched a child receive a Christmas gift that they've been hassling you for all year?

There's so much joy and so much thankfulness when they receive such a gift compared to, say, when they ask for something on a whim and they get it.

When our desires are tested in prayer and when we've stayed the course and received what we long for, our thankfulness abounds to God for his gifts to us and he is glorified and that's what we're here to do.

So persevering prayer brings God glory as it increases our dependence and gratitude to him.

Secondly, persevering in prayer, in praying God's will makes us privileged partners prayers in God's plans.

God has chosen to use our prayers when they are according to his will to affect his plan in this world. I think that's mind-blowing. The sovereign God who can do whatever he likes, whenever he likes, has chosen to use us Christians, has given us Christians the great honor of participating in his work by petitioning him in prayer and seeing him bring about his purposes in response to our prayers.

[19 : 34] It's an amazing privilege. If you think about this, this is what the Lord's prayer is really about. Not as a ritual to be mindlessly repeated, but as a constant bringing before the Father of the things that are his will.

That his name be honored, that his will be done, his kingdom come. We know that God will definitely answer this prayer. We've seen the sneak preview of how he's going to do it in his word. But until such time as that happens, when Jesus returns, God wants us to keep praying the Lord's prayer, to shape our prayers in that way, because our prayers are actually one of the means that he's ordained to fulfill those purposes for all of human history.

perseverance. Persevering in praying his will makes us privileged partners in God's plans. That's God's will in the broader sense.

What about when we don't know God's will in a particular situation? Perhaps you're praying for someone, a loved one, to change in a certain way, for something to happen in their life.

[20 : 49] Perhaps you're praying for a particular job opportunity or promotion to open up. We hope it's what God wants, but we're not sure. If we offer that prayer to God once or twice and leave it, we have little way of knowing what God's will is for that situation and whether we've really prayed in accordance with that will.

But if we continue to persevere in prayer, bringing that request to God over and over again with consistency and care, that prayer becomes an important means for us to discern God's will.

This is especially the case if you use the discipline of writing out your prayers or journaling them or if you have a regular daily prayer time that follows a certain pattern or that you can remember from one day to the next what you've been praying because then if you use these good disciplines, you can start to see that your prayers are discerning what God's will is.

The way it works is if God continues to be silent in response to our persistent prayer, then we're prompted to ask him why.

We're prompted to ask him to show us if we're praying wrongly. We're prompted to ask, is it us who need to change? Is there something else that you have for me? As we persevere in prayer, seeking to discover why our prayers are not answered, seeking to shape our petitions according to God's will, we will most certainly start to get a clearer understanding of God's ways in the world and he will move in our minds and shape our heartfelt desires according to his will and we'll start to notice that our prayers are changing.

[22 : 51] His priorities become our priorities. Our highest delight becomes to serve him, to see him glorified, his will done. A stunning and sobering example of this, of course, is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In Matthew 26, verse 39, we're able to read Jesus' heartfelt prayer. My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want, but what you want.

Jesus' desire was to avoid the agonizing events that were to come, as he anticipated not only the pain of death by crucifixion, but also the separation from his Father that would come as he bore the sins of the world.

And as a faithful and righteous son, he brought that desire to the Father in persevering prayer. Yet, his greatest priority was to do the Father's will.

And so as he persevered in prayer in the garden a second time, a third time, saying the same words, the text says, in verse 44, the Father's plan for him came into sharper focus.

[24 : 11] His willingness to follow to the end was strengthened to the point where we read in verse 46 that he could now get up and go to his betrayal with firm resolve and a confidence that what was to come was exactly what the Father wanted.

persevering in prayer helps us to pray the will of the Father and shapes us to obey that will, making us privileged partners in God's plans.

And finally, we're to persevere in prayer because we desperately need it. not only do we need the discipline of persevering prayer to develop our characters to become more like Christ, to develop our patience, our endurance, to purify and clarify our desires, to test and strengthen our faith.

We also just need God's help constantly. I speak not so much now of persevering in prayer, you know, bringing the same request over and over again, but I speak of persevering in prayer as a lifestyle, as just being devoted to prayer, being a constant, regular, thoughtful, alert, praying.

I used the expression earlier staying the course in prayer and for me and for some of you that might make you kind of cringe a little because that's been used, that phrase has been used, staying the course in regards to the war in Iraq over the last few months and it's a bit difficult.

[25 : 55] But the fact is the Christian life is a battle and we do need to stay the course in prayer because prayer brings to us all God's resources, all God's grace.

It is the means he has chosen to do that in our Christian life. As we face the onslaught of the enemy, our own flesh, the world, we need to stay the course in prayer so that we can keep fighting the good fight, bringing glory to God and just growing in discipleship.

The Apostle Paul himself didn't just pray for churches in crisis. He didn't just pray for people when there was a problem. He kept praying over and over and over again just for their growth in discipleship.

Our passage today from Philippians 1, 9 to 11 is a great example. Only a few verses earlier Paul declared that he is confident that what God has started in the Philippians he's going to bring to completion.

He's confident in that. But what does he do in our passage in verses 9 to 11? He prays for exactly that about which he is confident.

[27 : 10] And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Paul knew that simple sustaining for the Christian life comes through prayer. prayer. Just living the life of discipleship, even when we're going well, just needs constant prayer.

prayer. God has commanded us to persevere in prayer. And he's promised that he answers such prayer.

Our motivation for persevering in prayer is not our circumstances but the character and capacity of God which have been proven to us in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Christ. And yet, so often we're deceived into believing that it doesn't matter if we pray or not, not realizing the unbelievable privilege and transforming power of being used by God as he accomplishes his will.

[28 : 29] We're deceived into believing we're too busy to pray when the truth is that God could accomplish for us in five seconds what we couldn't do for ourselves in five years. And we're deceived that we can make do in our Christian walk with our five minutes of prayer before church on a Sunday or a few sentences as we drift off to sleep at night or a mechanical help prayer when we're facing a stressful situation.

When we're missing out on the benefits of persistent, thoughtful, regular prayer for our spiritual battle. You see, when we persevere in prayer, we bring God glory as we increase independence and gratitude.

When we persevere in prayer, we begin to pray the will of the Father, making us privileged partners in his plans. And when we persevere in prayer, we're dealing with our desperate need of God's grace and resources in the battle of the Christian life when things are going well and when they're going badly.

Persevering prayer is not just a command. It's the Father's means of blessing us beyond our imagination. So will you join me in asking our great God to give us the grace, strength and faith to persevere in prayer our whole lives long?

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do come to you today knowing that it is our desperate need to have you bring your love and your power into our life through the means you have chosen to use.

[30 : 18] Persevering prayer. We pray that you might give us the strength and the courage and the motivation to go on even when it's hard.

God, we pray that you might change our will according to your will as we pray. We ask that you might give many of us a new discipline in regular prayer.

Give us new ideas of how to best do that according to our own personalities that we might indeed have time with you every day and be able to see how you grow us and teach us in persevering prayer.

And Lord our God, I ask that you might give each one of us boldness to keep bringing our requests to you over and over again, knowing that you love us and that you are all powerful to answer.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.