

The Ordinary Results of a Life of Prayer

Introduction:

The question that we are seeking to answer in this paper is suggested by its title. What can we expect as the ordinary results of a life of Prayer?

Notice, first of all, that I said a “life of prayer” and not a “prayer life.” Often when we use the term “prayer life” we are imagining it as one of many components of our total life. We are seeing it as one of the many activities in which we engage. We place it alongside our work life, our family life and all of our other lives often reducing it to such a small part of our life that its impact on our life becomes negligible. Prayer, however, is more than an occasional activity in which Christians periodically engage. It is an open and ongoing communication with God. If the Psalmist can say that the wicked “through the pride of his countenance, will not seek *after God: God is not in all his thoughts*” (Psalm 10:4), then the opposite must be true of the righteous; because of the humility of his heart, God is never long absent from his thoughts. In the final analysis there are two ways to live. Either we live our lives before God in communication with him seeking at every moment to know and to do his will, or we live lives directed by self-will.

Now, when we live a life of prayer, what are the normal and ordinary results? I stress the ordinary results, because often when we read about prayer or hear people speak about prayer, it is the extraordinary answers to prayer that are emphasized. These extraordinary answers to prayer do happen and they are wonderful when they do, but they are extraordinary by their infrequency and by their specificity. They are special infusions of grace that reassure us of God’s love and power, but they tend to be unexpected and unique occurrences. I would also add that when I say ordinary I do not mean natural. The ordinary results of prayer belong to the realm of grace every bit as much as the extraordinary. What I do mean is that they are universal and constant. Each of us, if we are walking with the Lord, may experience during our lifetime a few very special occurrences of God’s grace which will be unique to us. They will become our personal treasures that we may on occasion discretely share with others, or we may, like Mary, keep these things in our heart and ponder them (Luke 2:19). What I am stressing here, however, are the results of a life of prayer that all of us should be experiencing regularly. This is the universal experience of prayer that is the necessary antecedent to the fulfillment of mission, whether it is my personal life mission, or the greater mission of Christ in the world.

Simply put, if we are to pray as we should, we must have the right expectations. False expectations will be both disappointed and disappointing. Meister Eckhart has written: “When someone is looking for something and he sees no sign of what he is looking for there where he is looking, he will perhaps continue to look; but without enthusiasm. If, however, he begins to

find some traces of what he is looking for, he will begin to look seriously.” He said this in the context of prayer. No one will long persist in prayer if he or she does not reap some harvest from that prayer.

Before taking up what I consider to be three of the more important fruits of a life of prayer, let me first emphasize two important, but sometimes overlooked, dimensions of prayer, and establish a primary biblical starting point for the discussion.

First, let me say that we must remember that prayer is, as much, if not more, listening than it is talking. It is a conversation, a dialogue. Nothing is more sterile than a one-sided conversation. Now it is important to remember when we are talking about prayer that prayer is most generally a response. We speak best to God when we have first heard him speaking to us. We will never get very far in the life of prayer until we learn to cultivate the discipline of listening, of hearing what God is saying to us. Now when I hear the God of heaven speaking to me, and actually giving me the right to respond, I do not have to force myself to pray, nor will I find myself nodding off as I pray. To avoid any confusion here, I should also stress that the primary way God speaks to us is through the inspired Scriptures. Thus we cultivate the discipline of listening that is essential to a consistent life of prayer by regular, attentive, and patient listening to what God is saying to us in his Word.

Second, we must remind ourselves that prayer is a work of the Spirit. In his most comprehensive and insistent exhortation to prayer the Apostle Paul, after telling us to put on the whole armor of God, commands us to “pray always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit and to watch thereunto with all perseverance for all saints” (Ephesians 6:18). Prayer belongs not to the realm of nature, but to that of grace. It is not a work, but a response to grace. The Apostle Paul, himself, is a clear biblical example of this truth. In Acts 9 after his experience on the Road to Damascus, while he is still blind from the encounter, the Lord comes to a man called Ananias in a vision to send him to restore Saul’s sight. This is what he says to Ananias in verse 11: “Arise go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus: for, behold he prays.” Now Paul, as a good Jew, had been praying all his life. There is a new dimension to his praying now, however. It is interesting that when you study Paul’s prayers you find almost no trace of the Jewish prayers he would have prayed before his conversion. Paul’s prayer is now animated by the Holy Spirit, who has given him new life. As he himself will describe it later in II Corinthians 4 the scales have been removed from his eyes, the veil has been removed from the Scriptures, He has beheld the face of Christ, and God’s Spirit has given him liberty, and for the first time in his life he truly prays. It is this experience that Charles Wesley describes in the third stanza of his hymn, “And Can it Be”.

“Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light.
My chains fell off; My heart was free.
I rose, went forth and followed thee.”

Finally, before looking at the ordinary expectations of a life of prayer, let me establish the prayers of the Apostle Paul as my primary biblical reference. I do so, first of all, because along with the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Psalms they are the biblical passages that have most informed my understanding of prayer, and most formed my practice of prayer. Secondly, I have chosen them because of the missionary context of what we are saying. Paul's prayers take us to the heart of his understanding of his mission. When we understand his prayers and the way he prayed we will understand his mission and ours.

The particular part of the Pauline prayer material that I want to focus on are his intercessory prayers on behalf of the recipients of his letters, or as they are often referred to in the exegetical literature, Paul's prayer reports. It is of little importance whether they are one or the other. It is the difference between actually praying for someone in their presence or saying: "I am praying for you", and giving them a detailed list of all the things you are praying for. The end result is the same. They know how you are praying. There are seven of these prayers in Paul's letters (Eph. 1:15-32; 3:14-21, Phil. 1:8-11, Col. 1:9-14, I Thess. 3:9-13, II Thess. 1:11-12; 5:23-24). They are especially important in the Prison Epistles. Time will not allow us to refer to all of them, but I would point out that while they vary significantly in what is said and the way that it is said, the goals they seek are strikingly similar. Think about it this way. Paul saw prayer as one of the major means through which he accomplished his ministry. He prayed, for example, as he preached and taught. When he was preaching he was striving for the same ends as when he was praying. If you want to get a good grasp of these prayers read them as an answer to the question: "What does God want to accomplish in my life and in his church?" It is to this end that Paul prays for others, that the work of God might be accomplished in their lives. That is the thing that preoccupies him. Now think about that in relationship to the question with which we started: "What are the ordinary results of prayer?" If we understand the goals of Paul's prayers, we will understand what God wants to do in our lives, in our churches, and among the nations. If we learn from him and begin to pray in the same direction that he prayed, then we will begin to see those things accomplished.

Before enumerating the results we are going to look at, let us listen to a couple of these prayers:

"And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and *in* all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:9-11).

"For this cause we also, since the day we heard *it*, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light" (Col. 1:9-12).

Analysis of these prayers will yield more than three results sought by Paul, but the three I am going to emphasize are never far from Paul's mind, and they are at the center of God's desire for all of his people. These are things that God wants to give each of us, and for which each of us should be constantly praying both for ourselves and for others. The three things are:

- God's direction and instruction that we might know his will
- God's enabling that we might do his will
- God's friendship, that we might experience, and be instruments of his love, his joy, and his peace

I. God's Instruction

We cannot live in the world and accomplish God's will and do his work unless we are taught of God. We are in constant need of enlightenment. Paul was always praying for all believers that they would always be aware of all that they had and were in Christ and that they would understand God's will and do it. In the passage we just read from Philippians he prays that our "love might abound more and more in all knowledge and judgment." The result of this, he says, is that we will then always choose the best thing. Often, our problem is not that we do a bad thing, but rather that we do not do the best thing, the thing that would be most useful, most productive. Only God can give us the insight to enable us to do that. This is what Paul is saying in Eph. 5:14-17 when he exhorts us:

"Wherefore he says, Awake you who sleep, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light. See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore, do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is."

This constant concern of Paul's prayers is equally a persistent theme of the Psalms. In the Psalms the righteous frequently implore God to teach them his ways. This prayer is voiced eloquently in Psalm 25:4-5:

"Shew me thy ways, O LORD; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou *art* the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day."

God will teach us if we will seek his instruction with an obedient heart. He is a Father who delights to give good things to his children, and nothing delights him more than when his children desire to walk in his ways and seek his counsel and his enlightenment. Make Psalm 25:4-5 your constant prayer and you will be taught of God. He will lead you in "paths of righteousness for his namesake."

II. God's Enabling

We must always be wary of ourselves. In this life we will never be free of the corruption of sin. The devil likes nothing better than to make evil seem good. Only the light of God's Word can uncover the intents of our hearts (Heb. 4:12). It is in light of the truth of God, as we are taught of God, that we can, as Paul prays "walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God." To please God we must be led of God and enabled by God. Any work of our own hands will be tainted and corrupted by sin. God's way is always "by grace through faith." We offer to him, in faith, that which his grace enables us to do. We must never be so presumptuous as to offer him the works of our own hands. All that pleases God flows from an obedient heart, motivated by the Holy Spirit, and it is a response to prayer. Paul expresses this most eloquently perhaps in Ephesians 3:14-19 when he prays:

"For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what *is* the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God."

This strengthening of the inner man for which Paul intercedes is a constant need. It is only through the indwelling power of the love of Christ that we can fulfill the mission to which we have been called. May the prayer of the Psalmist "let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight O Lord my strength and my redeemer" always be our prayer.

III. The Friendship of God

The final fruit of prayer that I want to mention could be expressed in several different ways. Let me begin with Psalm 25:14. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him, he will show them his covenant." "Secret" is sometimes translated "friendship" in this verse. There is a passage in the Gospel of John that elucidates the relationship between the two things. In Jesus' farewell conversation with his disciples in chapters 13-16 one of the things he tells them is: "henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knows not what his lord does: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you" (John 15:14). When we are taught of God, and enabled by his grace, we begin to do the things which truly please him, then we begin to experience the friendship of God and the companionship of Christ.

This friendship with God is what Paul is alluding to in one of his most well-known instructions on prayer in Philippians 4:6-7. He first exhorts us "to be careful (or anxious) for nothing, but in everything through prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God." He then assures us in verse 7 that "the peace of God which passes all understanding will

guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” This peace is the peace of God’s presence. It is peace in the midst of the storm. It is peace that comes from knowing that he will “never leave us or forsake us.” It is the peace that comes from knowing that God is for us and nothing can ultimately stand against us. This peace fortifies us against the attacks of the world, the flesh, and the devil and enables us to persevere in the work to which God has called us.

When God so answers prayer and directs lives, his church is strengthened and his work is accomplished in the world. No human strategizing or planning can ever replace this spiritual enabling which comes as a gift of grace and an answer to prayer.

At the beginning I said that we must have proper expectations when we pray. As we live a life of prayer and seek to walk with God and please him we can be assured that he is always ready to confer on each one of his children and on his church his instruction to know his will, his enabling to do his will, and his friendship and presence. Seek these things and you will not be disappointed.

