

Praise For Grace

1 Cor. 1:4-9

Speaker: Pastor Mark Schindler

Sep. 6, 2015 PM



Tonight we begin a new series during our evening gatherings that will take us through the next thirteen weeks. The title of the series is **Priorities in Prayer**, in which several of us will preach on various biblical priorities that are to shape our prayer life. Each message will focus on a particular text where we will observe the foundation, frame, features, and focus of prayer in scripture. We will unpack each passage to uncover the Biblical basis, context, pattern, and aim it provides while looking at its practical applications to our own prayers.

These scriptures will cover a breadth of the Apostle Paul's instructions to the early church. In some of these texts Paul will talk about praying and in others we will observe Paul's prayers as an example or pattern of biblical priorities for prayer. It is our desire that the Lord will use these messages to encourage, teach, help, and challenge each of us to be a people who have a deeper understanding and are committed to prayer.



Timothy Keller, in his book on prayer, paints this illustration. Imagine a young child playing with their favorite toy. But as they happily bounce around the room playing, the toy suddenly breaks. The child is broken hearted. Joy turns to sorrow and the tears begin to flow. The child's father picks up the toy and gently says "Child, please don't cry. We just found out that a distant relative has left us millions of dollars. Soon, you will not have to worry about broken toys."

How often we are like this young child. We lack the understanding and appreciation of all that we have in Christ and focus on broken earthly things. We dwell on the sorrow over a simple toy when our entire world has marvelously changed. We are captivated by the fading value of earthly toys when the eternal treasures of salvation have been lavished upon us. Instead of cries of sadness, we should be filled with praise.

Brothers and sisters, prayers of praise are the antidotes to worry and discontentment. Prayer provides a perspective that inserts God and eternity back into the picture of our lives. It reorients our thinking around the intentional purposes of a good and Sovereign Lord. It reminds us of the glories and delights that are ours as children of the Almighty King. You see prayers of praise are filled with thankfulness for the presence and provision of our God. So that rather than crying out for leeks and onions in the captivity of Egypt, we cry out with hearts thankful for God's deliverance and faithfulness even in the wilderness.

Our text tonight is a prayer of praise over God's full and unending grace. This evening we will set our eyes down in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In it, he opens with a greeting and a prayer that is praise for God's grace. We should note, that this is a letter that arrives to a church that is struggling with problems of serious sin, divisions, pride, and a lack of brotherly love in the body. Paul's prayer is takes them from thoughts of pride and self-centeredness to thoughts of thankfulness for and dependence upon God's grace.

We should understand, that in this context there would likely be discouragement, frustrations, hopelessness, and anguish within the Corinthian church. What was it like when they gathered and this letter was first read? What was Paul thinking as he considered opening this letter with this prayer? We can only imagine how the words of this prayer echoed across the room and into the hearts of those who heard them. Together, let's pray before we take a look at what Paul wrote to this struggling church at Corinth.

[opening prayer]

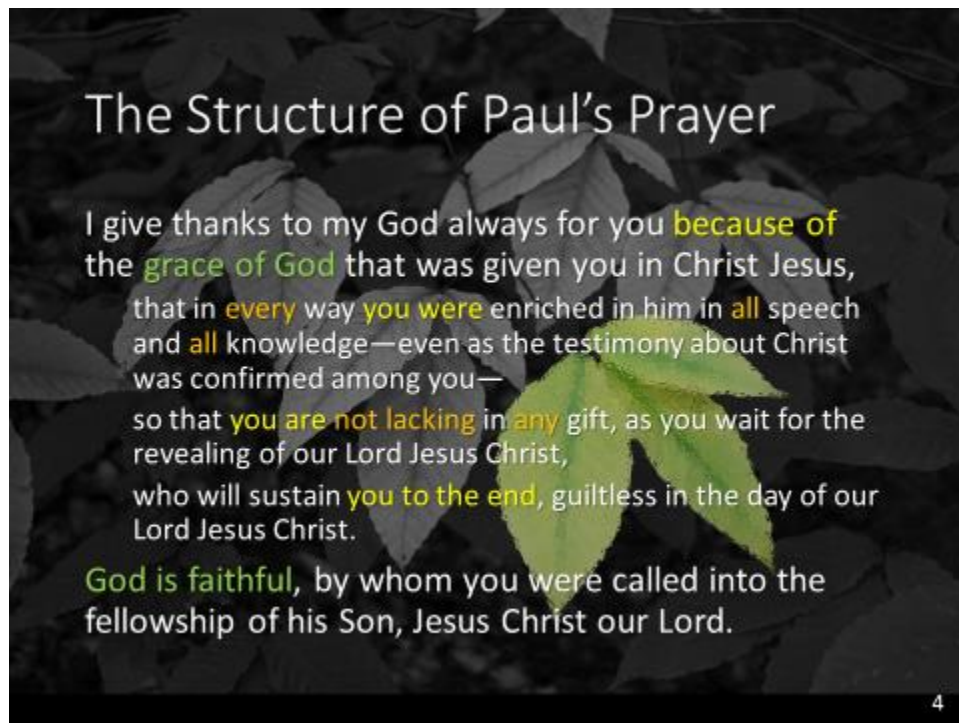


Paul's opening text in the first Chapter of 1 Corinthians provides an example of a priority of prayer that offers a praise for God's grace. This is a prayer meant to encourage and strengthen the church in Corinth. This is prayer filled with thankfulness and dependence upon Jesus that speaks to hearts sinfully deceived by pride, social status, and self-centeredness. This is a prayer that looks at the beauty of the Gospel and calls them to remember its power and provision to change stubborn and selfish hearts.

Paul's prayer flows from a heart that is thankful for the rich blessings that have been given to all believers in salvation. As he opens his letter, this prayer of praise engages and redirects their attention away from the mess and entanglements of the church's struggles, to the glorious grace that is theirs in Jesus Christ. Paul looks to God's favor and draws their thoughts to the greatness and goodness of their Lord.

Please turn to 1 Corinthians 1 and follow along as I read the first nine verses. 1 Corinthians Chapter 1, verses 1 through 9. This is God's word to us this evening.

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.



The first thing I would like for us to look at is the structure of Paul's prayer. How does Paul begin his prayer for the Corinthian church? He says, "I give thanks to my God always because of you..." Doesn't this seem like an odd way for Paul to pray for them? Remember, Paul is writing to a church that is in trouble. We have a man who is physically involved with his father's wife. They were divisions and arguing going on. They are misusing the Lord's table. They were uninformed about spiritual gifts. Personally, I would have expected something more along the lines of, "Lord, help these poor souls out of this horrible mess."

But instead Paul starts his prayer by being thankful for the blessings they have in the grace that God has given them in Christ Jesus. In other words, he is simply thankful for the Gospel. Rather than focusing on all their troubles, he moves them to consider the favor and kindness of God in the midst of their troubles. Paul offers praise for a grace that was not their own, not something they earned or deserved; but a grace that was given freely out of God's great love.

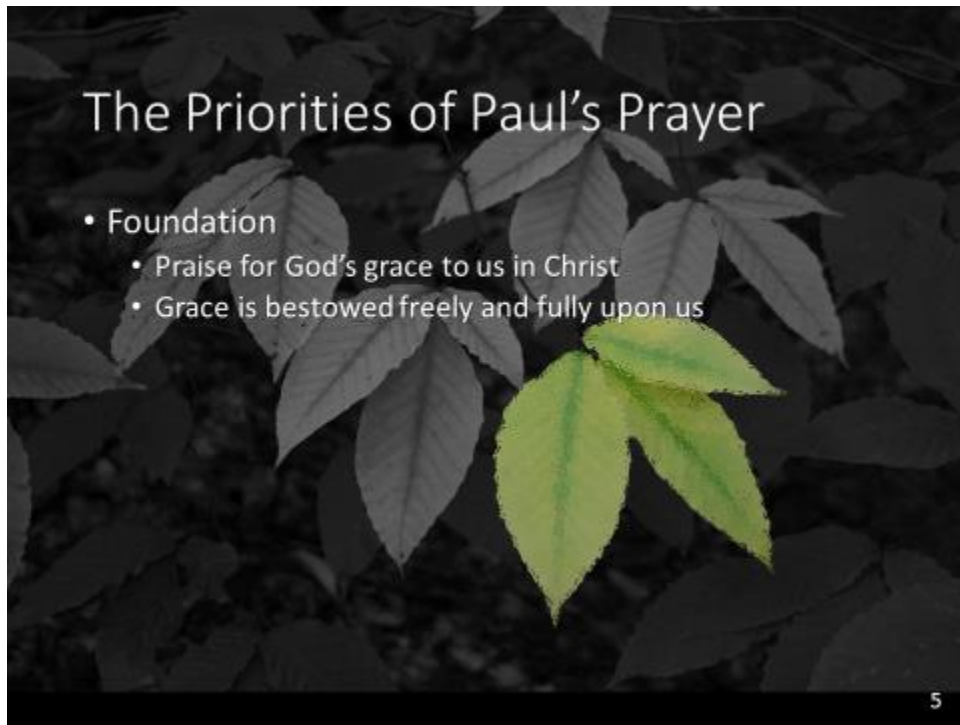
Paul then builds on his surprising start by praising God for three aspects or dimensions of God's grace in their lives. Notice the phrase "because of" leading to these three facets of grace that are applied here. Paul's praise is directed to remembering that God's grace to believers is complete. It was at work in the past. It is at work in the present. It is at work in the future. The Corinthians could not escape the power of the Gospel of grace. John McArthur puts it this way in his commentary, "Our past is already taken care of, our present is provided for, and our future is assured."

The first facet of grace in Paul's praise is a past benefit indicated by the phrase "you were". The power of Gospel in the lives of believers has provided (past tense) everything we need in speech and understanding to establish and strengthen his people. Despite all their problems, God had given the Corinthians everything they needed to glorify Him. Note the depth of God's grace in the words "every" and "all" here. The Corinthians had all that needed and had been (again past tense) strengthened in every way. All that they needed they had in Christ through the grace and gift of salvation.

The second facet of grace is a present benefit indicated by the phrase "you are". Paul praises God that the Corinthians are not lacking in any gift. Not only were they strengthened in every way through their salvation, they continue to receive blessings in Christ through the gifts they have been graced with. Again, the emphasis on the comprehensive depth of these gifts is that they do not lack **any** gift. In Christ, they are equipped with every good gift needed to serve the body of Christ. The issue they had was not with the gifts given, but their use of them.

The third facet of grace is a future benefit indicated by the phrase "to the end". Paul's praise looks to a future horizon of God's sustaining grace that will faithfully carry the Corinthian church to that day when they would be present in the glory and presence of Jesus Christ their Savior. Paul thanks God that true believers are secure in Christ. In the midst of trials and sin, there is a wonderful hope as we look to a future grace that will be fulfilled on that day when Christ returns to take us home. Paul's praise looks toward to that day when the troubles of this world will pass into a far better place where we shall see the presence and perfections of God's glory.

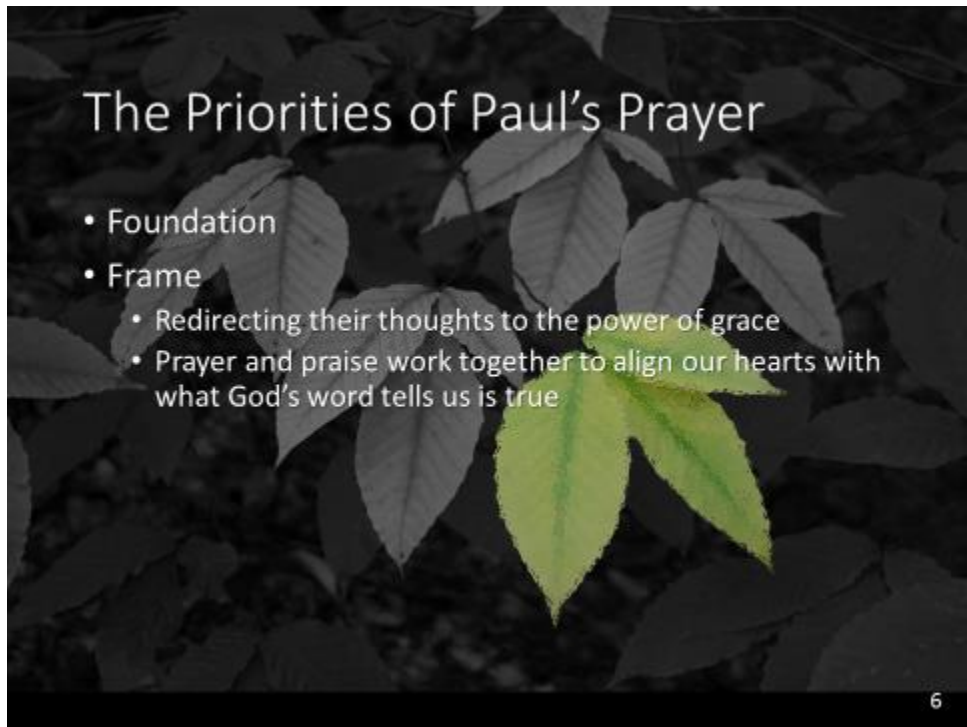
Paul ends his prayer with a simple sentence of praise for God's faithfulness. God's grace is secure in His power and commitment to do all that He has promised. For the believer, there is no need to worry or be anxious. God is trustworthy and sure. What He says, He will do. Our hope is not in a faithfulness or righteousness of our own. It rests solely on the grace of salvation bought for us under the weight of the cross. It comes solely upon the precious blood of Jesus our Savior sacrificed to make payment for our sins. And it depends solely upon the righteousness of the risen Lamb freely given to us that we might one day enter guiltless into heaven's glory. Praise be indeed for the abundant grace that flows to us from our faithful God.



Let's look at the Biblical foundation of Paul's prayer. This prayer is rich in theology. Its focus is God-ward, raising our thoughts to the heights of God's glory and character. The main theme of this prayer is **praise for God's grace to us in Christ**. We praise God that the grace that is ours in salvation has been given, is received, and is confirmed in the lives of believers. And attached to this grace is all the power, strength, and gifts we will ever need even as we hope for His return.

This kind of prayer turns our eyes from the problems of broken lives, sorrows, and pain to look up see through eyes of faith all of the many blessings of grace we have been given in Christ. It is the kind of prayer that expresses trust in a good and sovereign Lord who loves us and is working out His glory and kindness in our lives. No matter how high or how low we find ourselves, our God is always worthy of our praise.

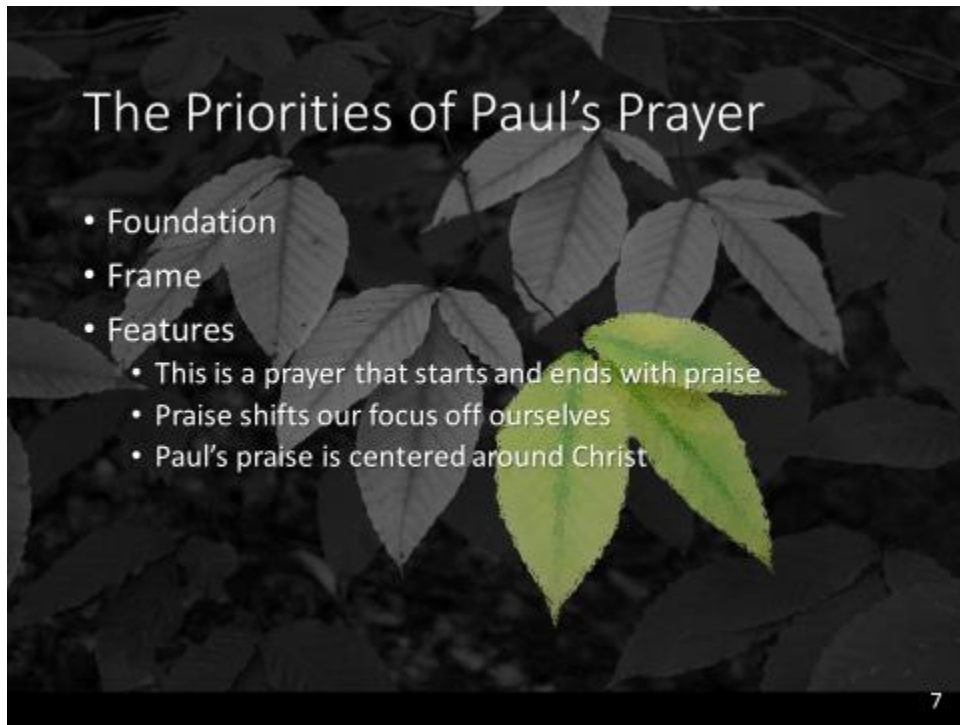
A secondary theme of this prayer is the reminder that all that we have in this grace is of God. God's favor to us has not been accomplished by anything we have done or deserve. **Grace is bestowed freely and fully upon us**. God's grace, past, present, and future has been won and is secure in Christ. Thankfully, there is nothing we can do to merit it. Nor is there anything we can do to lose it. We can rejoice with the Corinthians, that even in the middle of a mess, God's grace to us abounds even more. We will not experience any less or any more of the blessings of based upon who we are or what we have done. We are completely dependent upon Christ for the grace and all our praise flows to and through Him.



Let's look at the context and frame of Paul's prayer. Imagine yourself hearing Paul's prayer for the first time as a member of the Corinthian church. Most, if not all, are well aware of the problems that have been going on for some time. Perhaps some are expecting or hoping that Paul would bring a stinging rebuke to put others in their place and put the church in order. Some, to be sure, were nervously awaiting to see if Paul would speak to their own personal problems or situation in the church. And although Paul will deal with each issue and concern, his opening prayer is one of encouragement and **redirecting their thoughts to the power of grace** and their identity in Christ.

By praising God for His grace, Paul speaks to their pride by reminding the church at Corinth that none deserve His favor and goodness. They all stand fully dependent upon the work of Christ. Paul's praise speaks to their lack of harmony by reminding them that God has given them all that they need to live in harmony and unity with each other. His praise for their not lacking in gifts speaks to their misuse and confusion around those gifts. Gifts that were meant to serve and minister to the church with a right sense of use and priority.

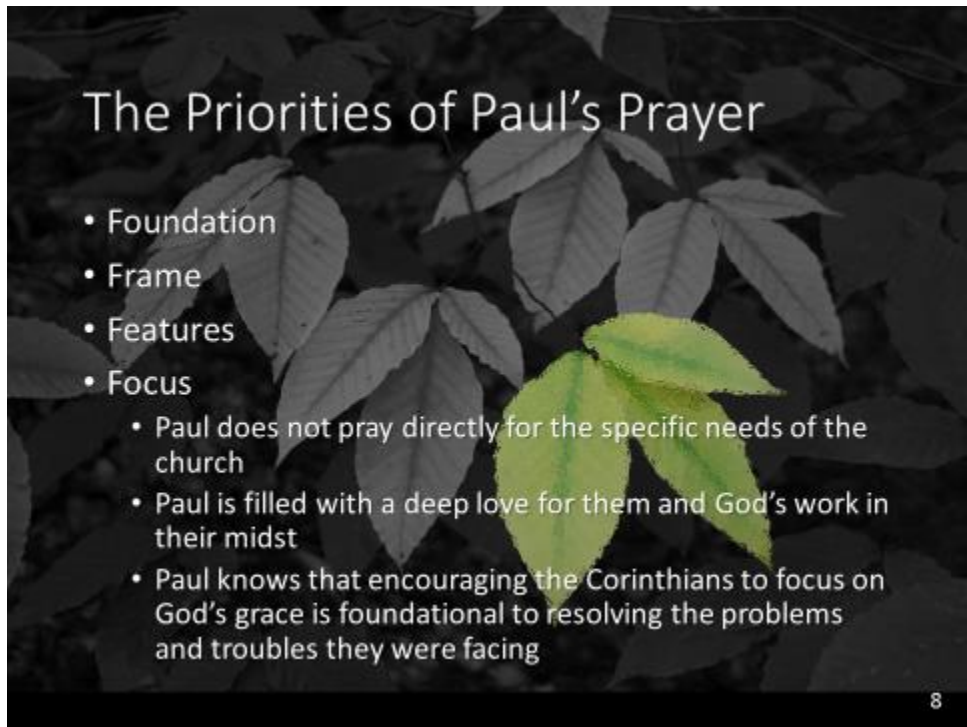
Regardless of a believer's circumstances or situation in life, **prayer and praise work together to align our hearts with what God's word tells us is true.** It reminds us that we were saved into the community of Christ's kingdom and ministry. It instructs us that we now live in the context and community of Christ's kingdom and ministry. And it gives us hope that we will one day exchange this strange world for an eternal home in community Christ and all believers this world has ever known. When we pray like this, we exchange the cares of this world for the joys of Christ. And when we pray like this, it gives us strength and hope to endure for the sake and name of Jesus our Lord.



Let's look at the features that characterize this prayer. First, **this is a prayer that starts and ends with praise**. As we listen to Paul's praise, we sense that his joy is not just about the mere facts around God's grace, but even more so for the presence of that grace in the lives of the people in the church at Corinth. Grace is not just a theological idea, it's about people. Grace is not theoretical or an academic idea. All believers participate in God's grace through Christ. It permeates who we are. And that thought alone should fill our hearts with great joy and wonder.

Praise also shifts our focus off ourselves. The context of difficulty in which we find this prayer is another important characteristic. When troubles come it is so easy to get wrapped up in trying to change our circumstances, to exert control over the course of our lives, and to relegate God to the distant corners of our minds. But praise stops the frantic flow of self-absorbed thoughts and looks to God for perspective and truth. It's not about me. It's not about you. And it's not about us. It starts and ends with God. And when we find our hearts leaning toward pride and self-dependence, we turn and lean our hearts back toward our grace-giving and faithful God.

We also see in this prayer that Paul's praise is centered around Christ. The grace we have received was given to us **in Christ Jesus**. It is the testimony **about Christ** that is confirmed in the life and ministry of the church. We eagerly await the coming of **our Lord Jesus Christ**, even as we live and work in ministry. We are sustained **in Christ** to the very end to be found righteous and guiltless in the day of our Lord's return. And finally, we are called into fellowship **with God's Son Jesus Christ our Lord**. True praise will always make much of Christ to the glory of God the Father.



Let's look at the focus of Paul's prayer. What is Paul's purpose and aim by beginning his letter this way? Why does Paul open with a prayer of praise? Why is it that Paul does not pray directly for the specific needs of the church? I think if Paul had asked me to write a prayer to the Corinthians it would have been filled with practical requests for God to change hearts, bring unity, defeat sin, and do His work among His people. Direct and to the point; as if God needs my clarity to accomplish His plans. Not that this would be wrong or even a bad prayer, but it is not the direction Paul went.

I believe that Paul offers a prayer of praise for two reasons. One, I believe that when Paul thinks of the Corinthian church he is filled with a deep love for them and God's work in their midst. Here is the heart of a shepherd who loves the church. Rather than seeing dirty sheep in need of guidance and correction, he sees souls who need gentleness and love. Thus his prayer of praise is both personal and natural. When he thinks the church at Corinth, Paul cannot separate them from the work of God's grace in their midst. He is compelled to give God praise.

The second reason is more practical. Paul knows that encouraging the Corinthians to focus on God's grace is foundational to resolving the problems and troubles they were facing. They needed to be reminded that it was God who was at work among them and not the work of men. They needed to be reminded that in light of the treasures they had in Christ, they were all poor and equals before God. They needed to hear that God would sustain them and would be faithful to the end so that they would have hope and endure through the difficulties that were before them.

Through his prayer, Paul is able to praise God while establishing these foundational truths in their minds. Some, maybe many, heard this prayer as Paul's letter was read the first time and were humbled at the reminder of God's grace. Hearts may have been softened and repented of sin.

Some who were discouraged may have been reminded that Christ will have His victory. And as they heard this prayer, they were heard afresh the power of the Gospel and would have been strengthened as they responded with praise of their own.



Let me close with a few questions to challenge our thinking about prayer. First, I think the obvious question is “How often are our prayers characterized by praise and thanksgiving?” You see a heart filled by a lack of contentment will express itself in a prayer life that is all about asking God for what we want rather than thanking God for what we have. Conversely, a heart filled with gratitude will give God praise even in the midst of difficulty and trials.

Brothers and sisters, please understand that I am not minimizing or making light of the really hard struggles many have in life. Just like David in the Psalms, there will be times we doubt, times when we question, and times when we want our own way. But even then, we confess our lack of faith and bring prayers of praise to God so that it has its effect on our hearts and aligns our thinking with what is always true about our God. The truth that His grace is sufficient for our needs and His goodness is always behind the course for our lives.

Another question that comes to mind is “How do our circumstances change the nature of our prayer?” Another way to think about this is whether I praise God when all is going well but I begin to doubt when the storms come and life begins to challenge my wants and desires. While this is often how we choose to respond in the flesh, the odd thing is that is exactly the opposite of what we need to do.

The greater the storm, the greater my need for shelter. The greater the temptation, the greater my need for strength. So often I am ready to give up before the rain comes or the battle begins. I forget that God has a purpose to strengthen and shape me through the storm. I forget that

Christ has secured the victory over sin and am free to walk in righteousness. But if I can stop and offer praise and thanksgiving, I allow the Spirit to work in my heart and change self-centered thinking into God-centered thinking. For God is my refuge, my strength, and my help whether in trouble or in need.

A final question I would like to consider tonight is this. “Do we pray more for God to change our circumstances or more for God to change our hearts?” Again, let me say that there are times to pray for God to change circumstances and we are free to share our hearts with God about what we want, don’t want, and struggle with. God knows our hearts and we would be foolish to think we could hide our thoughts from Him. What I am getting at with this question is more of where our heart is inclined to go.

Paul’s prayer of praise for the Corinthian church centers around joy over what God has done in their lives. Paul does this in a way that gives the God glory for all that has been done in their lives. But absent from this prayer is any request for God to change their circumstances or remove the trials in their midst. Rather, I believe that Paul is more concerned with God being glorified in the midst of their trials. In fact, one could argue that trusting God in the midst of trials brings an even greater testimony to power of the Gospel in their lives. And ultimately, God’s glory is what believers should want more than anything else.

As we mature and grow in Christ, our desires and wants change. They shift from selfish desires to godly desires. They shift from worldly wants to eternal treasures. As that change begins to take place in our hearts, our perspective begins to be transformed. This life becomes a temporary stop on our way to a permanent home. Trials and difficulties that were seen as hardships now are means to produce spiritual growth and bring God glory. And as this transformation takes hold, our prayers shift from asking God to change circumstances to prayers of praise as we see our faithful God at work in our lives.

May we as a church grow in these areas. Let our prayers be filled with praise for all that God is doing though Christ in our midst. Even in the midst of temptation, difficulty, problems, and everyday life, let our hearts and minds be filled with praise. And let our hearts first desire what God wants. That His ways would be our own. So that in all things, we may give him praise for all that we have in Jesus Christ our Lord. He alone is enough to fill our hearts with great praise.

[closing prayer]

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