



A Prayer Perspective To Enlarge Prayer's Parameters

Every believer in Christ prays. Some pray throughout the day in response to the scriptural admonition to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Others pray when they feel like it, some pray according to a daily schedule, and others pray primarily in response to emergencies or special needs. Many pray before they eat and before going to sleep. No matter how often, where, or why one prays, every believer knows that one’s prayer life needs improvement.

A believer’s prayer life typically improves when the corresponding need and privilege of growing in Christ is recognized. See *Do You REALLY Believe What You Say about Prayer?* at <http://wordtruth.org/Do%20You%20Really%20Believe%20What%20You%20Say%20About%20Prayer.pdf>

In addition, on-going improvement of one’s prayer life depends on faithfully abiding in Christ. See *Prayer: A Viable Option or Absolute Necessity* at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Prayer%20A%20Viable%20Option%20or%20An%20Absolute%20Necessity.pdf> and *Prayerlessness: A Reflection of Self-Centeredness* at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Prayerlessness.pdf>

The above articles mention many aspects of prayer which you can review for God’s glory and your spiritual benefit. The remainder of this article, however, presents a perspective on prayer that is often missing in a believer’s prayer life. What follows is a reprint of chapter 12 of *Speaking Truth in Love* by David Powlison.* The narrative begins in the context of a pastor’s evaluation of a church’s biblical counseling ministry. However, this particular prayer perspective might be applicable to every need or request you ever utter or hear.

WHAT WILL YOU ASK FOR?

Let’s say you’ve become convinced that biblical counseling should be a core ministry of the church of Christ. Where do you begin?

It is natural perhaps to think first of starting a formal counseling ministry or a training program for lay counselors, or of hiring a pastor who will specialize in pastoral care and the cure of souls. But let me suggest a humbler, simpler starting point. Take things that you and your church are already doing. For example, consider prayer or small groups or worship or premarital counseling or hospital visitation. Rethink the way you do these things. What are the implications of the fact that Jesus Christ is always “counseling” his beloved people? What are the implications of the fact that the Bible is always addressing the particulars of what people want, trust, fear, think, feel, and act? Take prayer, for example. Almost by definition, a church prays, a Christian prays. But how do we pray? What do we ask for? What do our prayers actually talk about? How does a counseling vision teach people a different way to make prayer requests? How does it change the way we pray?

Over the years, I’ve listened carefully to prayers. I’ve heard and participated in pastoral prayers, prayer meetings, small prayer groups, individual prayer requests. People tend to pray for predictable things.

Among the most common:

- Heal the sick
- Comfort the bereaved
- Provide jobs and money to those in financial straits
- Bring family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers to faith in Jesus
- Help people to make major decisions wisely
- Protect those who are traveling
- Solve troubles and conflicts in family, work, school, and church
- Help us fulfill responsibilities on the job or in school
- Make ministries fruitful locally and around the world
- “Bless” and “be with” people, that good will happen

There’s nothing wrong with asking for any of these things. They are good gifts. But notice something. None of them involve the sanctification and transformation of the one making the request or the one for whom you are praying. Such prayer requests ask for good gifts, but they do not ask for the best gift, that our lives would be remade into the image of Jesus.

What do you ask people to pray for? What do others ask you to pray for? It's as though we each look at life through a video camera and ask for changes in everything except the person filming. The cameraman is never in view. In other words, the "counseling" or "wisdom" needs of the person are rarely talked about. We will pray with parents for their straying teenager to straighten out; we rarely pray for the parents not to be fearful, bitter, passive or controlling. We will pray for a person to get a job; we rarely pray that he would grow in faith as he learns not to fret about money. We pray for the conversion of someone's loved ones; we rarely pray that the believer would grow more loving and honest in the way she treats those loved ones.

A biblical counseling vision will alter how you ask for prayer and how you pray. It is one of the simplest ways to start incorporating a biblical counseling vision into your life and ministry. As people learn to pray in a different way, they start to have reasons to counsel each other more meaningfully. They get in touch with the real battles. They increasingly enter into the primary lifelong calling to "be a disciple," a learner. A lifelong learner knows a profound need to give and receive counsel – every day (Hebrews 3:12-14) – in order to grow up into the image of Jesus. As people become disciples, they increasingly understand their need for counsel. A church learning to pray rightly is a church taking a bold step toward becoming a community of mutual counsel.

Let's look at this through the particular example of praying for the sick. These are probably the most common prayer requests of all. I will frame the discussion from the standpoint of a pastor, who often invites and hears prayer requests, and often prays pastorally. The application to other problems and persons will be obvious.

How do you encourage members to pray beyond the sick list? This question has a simple answer but one that will keep all of us going for a long time: your members begin learning to pray beyond the sick list when *you* know how to pray beyond the sick list.

It sounds so simple. But it must not be that easy. Many pastoral prayers do not pray beyond the sick list . . . and they do not even pray very pointedly or intelligently for the sick. Many pastoral prayers sound like a nursing report at shift change in your local hospital: "The colon cancer in room 103 with uncertain prognosis . . . the broken leg that's mending well . . . the heart patient going into surgery . . . Such public prayers are often medically informative but spiritually impoverished. Usually physical healing is the sole goal.

Disheartening Prayers

Visitors to many of our churches might be pardoned if they get the impression that God is chiefly interested in perking up our health, yet not very good at it! The prayer list in many churches is filled with chronic illnesses, though deep down we know that everyone will die sooner or later, usually from progressive ill health. Too often pastoral prayers, prayer meetings, and prayer lists dishearten and distract the faith of God's people. Prayer becomes either a dreary litany of familiar words, or a magical superstition. It either dulls our expectations of God, or hypes up fantasy hopes. Prayers for the sick can even become a breeding ground for cynicism: wouldn't these people have gotten better anyway as nature took its course or medicine succeeded? Prayer can also become a breeding ground for bizarre ideas and practices; a spiritualized version of our culture's obsession with health and medicine; naming and claiming your healing; a superstitious belief that the quantity or fervency of prayer is decisive in getting God's ear; the notion that prayer has its own "power"; questioning the faith of a person who doesn't get better.

It's hard to learn how to pray. It's hard enough for many of us to make an intelligent, honest request to friends we trust for something we truly need. And when the request is termed "praying" and the friend is termed "God," things get even more tangled. You've heard it . . . the contorted syntax, formulaic phrases, meaningless repetition, vague non-requests, pious tone of voice, and air of confusion. If you talked to your friends or family that way, they'd think you'd lost your mind!

But if your understanding and practice of prayer changes, if your prayer requests and your model of prayer change, if your teaching on prayer changes, then you will change, and so will your relationship with God and his people.

Consider a few factors that can bring about such change.

Lessons from James' Prayers for the Sick

First, notice a few things about James 5:13-20. This passage is *the* warrant for praying for the sick. It is significant that James envisions prayer not in a congregational setting but in what we might think of as a counseling setting! The sick person asks for help, meets with a few elders, confesses sins, repents and draws near to God. Earnest prayer is described as affecting both the physical and spiritual states of that person. This doesn't mean it's wrong to pray from the pulpit for sick people. Of course not! But it ought to make us think twice that the classic text on praying for the sick assumes something highly personal and interpersonal taking place.

Notice how clearly James keeps spiritual issues in view. His letter is about growing in wisdom, and he doesn't change that emphasis when it comes to the sick. What he writes is based on his understanding that suffering is an occasion to become wise, a very good gift from above: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask . . . (James 1:2, 5). He has already illustrated this regarding poverty, injustice, and interpersonal conflict. Now he illustrates it regarding sickness.

James's focus on the spiritual issues operating in suffering does not mean that people get sick because they've sinned. That's sometimes true: IV drug use and sexual immorality do lead to AIDS on occasion. People do reap in sickness what they sow in sin. But to make this into a universal rule is mere superstition or the heartlessness of Job's counselors.

At least two other dynamics also play out in the way God meets us in sickness. Sickness, like any other trouble, can force us to stop and face ourselves and find the Lord. I may find sins I've been too busy to notice: irritability, indifference, self-indulgence, unbelief, joylessness, worry, complaining, driven-ness, trust in my own health and ability. I may find my need for Jesus' mercies quickened and my delight in God deepened. I may develop fruit of the Spirit that can grow only by suffering well: endurance of faith; hope and joy that transcend circumstances; mature character; richer knowledge of God's love; living for God, not my pleasures; the humility of weakness; the ability to help others who suffer. (James 1:3, Rom. 5:3-5; 1 Peter 1:6-8, 4:1-3, 2 Cor. 12:9-10, 1:4)

Sickness, like any trouble, is itself a temptation. Whether you face life-threatening disease or just feel lousy for a couple of days, it is amazing what that experience can bring out of your heart. Some people complain; others get angry – at God, at themselves, at others, at the inconvenience. Some pretend nothing's wrong; others pretend they're sicker than they are to get attention or avoid responsibilities. Some invest hope, time, and money in pursuing cure after cure. Others try to find someone or something to blame, even getting litigious. Still others just keep pressing on with life, doing, doing, doing – when God really intends them to stop and learn the lessons of weakness. Some become deeply fearful, imagining the worst. Some plunge into self-indulgence, manipulating everyone within reach to serve their every need. Others get depressed and question the value of their entire existence. Some are too proud to ask for help. Others brood that God must be out to get them, morbidly introspective about every real or imaginary failing.

You get the picture! Sickness provides one of the richest opportunities imaginable for spiritual growth and pastoral counseling, as James 5 makes clear. Is God interested in healing any particular illness? Sometimes. Is He always interested in making us wise, holy, trusting, and loving, even amid our pain, disability, and dying? Yes and amen.

People learn to pray beyond the sick list when they realize what God is really all about.

Three Kinds of Prayers

Second, consider the vast biblical teaching on prayer. How many of Scripture's prayers focus on sickness? A significant few, giving good reason to plead with God for healing. We've mentioned James 5. In Isaiah 38, Hezekiah pleads for restoration of health, and he is healed. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul prays three times to be delivered from a painful affliction – but God said *No*. Psalm 35:12-14 mentions heartfelt prayer for the sick as a natural expression of loving concern. Both Elijah and Elisha plead to God for only sons whose deaths devastated their mothers (1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4). In both cases God restores them. Coming at the issue from the opposite direction, the Bible's last word on Asa is negative because "his disease was severe, yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but the physicians" (2 Chronicles 16:12).

Prayer has many degrees of intensity, with supplication and outcry the strongest. It is striking how passionate and blunt the prayers for healing are. These passages vividly challenge the perfunctory prayers that often are offered even by people preoccupied with illness! When you pray for the sick (or teach the sick to seek God themselves), it ought to be a fiercely thoughtful firestorm.

It is clear, however, that the vast majority of Scriptural prayers focus on other things. Broadly speaking, there are three emphases of biblical prayer: circumstantial prayers, wisdom prayers, and kingdom prayers. Praying for the sick is a form of the first.

- Sometimes we ask God to *change our circumstances*: heal the sick, give daily bread, protect from suffering and evil, make our leaders just, convert friends and family, make our work prosper, provide me with a spouse, quiet this storm, send rain, give us a child.

- Sometimes we ask God to *change us*: deepen my faith, teach us to love each other, forgive sins, make me wise, make us know you better, help me to sanctify you in my heart, don't let me dishonor you, help us understand Scripture, teach me to encourage others.
- Sometimes we ask God to *change everything by revealing himself* more fully, magnifying his glory and rule. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, be exalted above the heavens, let your glory be over all of the earth, come Lord Jesus.

In the Lord's Prayer you see examples of all three, tightly interwoven. The Lord's kingdom involves the destruction of our sins and sufferings. His reign causes a flourishing of love's wisdom and a wealth of situational blessing. Prayers for God to change me and my circumstances are requests that he reveal his glory and mercy on the stage of this world.

When any of these three gets detached from the other two, prayer tends to go sour. If you just pray for better circumstances, God becomes the errand boy (usually disappointing) who exists to fill your shopping list of desires – no sanctifying purposes, no higher glory. If you only pray for personal change, it tends to reveal an obsession with moral self-improvement, a self-absorbed spirituality detached from others and the tasks of life. Where is the longing for Christ's kingdom to right *all* wrongs, not just to alleviate my sins so I don't feel bad about myself? If you only pray for the sweeping invasion of the kingdom, prayers are over-generalized, failing to walk out how the kingdom rights real wrongs, wipes away real tears, and removes real sins. Prayer pursues a God who never touches ground until the last day.

We could give countless examples of these three sorts of prayer. Consider the Psalms, *the* book of talking with God. About ninety psalms are “minor key.” Intercessions regarding sin and suffering predominate – always in light of God revealing his mercies, power, and kingdom. In about one-third of these, the battle with personal sin and guilt appears. Often there are requests that God make us wiser: “Teach me”; “Give me understanding”; “Revive me.” In many more psalms, you see requests to change circumstances: deliver me from evildoers; be my refuge and fortress; destroy your enemies. These are always tied to requests that God arrive with kingdom glory and power. God reveals himself by making these bad things and bad people go away! Then there are the sixty or so “major key” psalms. These emphasize the joy and praise that mark God's kingdom reign revealed.

Consider also the prayers of Philippians 1:9-11 and Colossians 1:9-14. Here we see no mention of circumstances, no request to be healed, fed, or protected. The requests focus on gaining wisdom (in light of the coming of God's kingdom). Such wisdom expresses itself in vertical and horizontal dimensions, love for God and love for neighbor. These two prayers plead with God to deepen both kinds of love in others: may God make you know him better. May God make your love for people wise.

Finally, consider Ephesians 1:15-23 and 3:14-21. Here, too, the prayers focus on wisdom in light of Christ's glory. Again, there are no circumstantial requests; there aren't even requests to grow in intelligent love for others. Paul zeroes in what we need most: that God would make you know him better.

Why don't people pray beyond the sick list? We pray for circumstances to improve so that we might feel better and life might get better. These are often honest and good requests – unless they're the only requests we make. Detached from the purposes of sanctification and a yearning for the coming of the King, prayers for circumstances become self-centered.

Teach people to pray with the three-stranded braid of our real need. They will pray far beyond the sick list. And they will pray in a noticeably different way for the sick. They won't just be praying for alleviation of the troubles of life. They will be praying for the things that counseling is about: transforming decision makers who live in the midst of those troubles.

Footnote

*Excerpted from *Speaking Truth in Love* by David Powlison © 2005 by David Powlison.

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Note: The text of each verse reference above is printed below in order of appearance.

Hebrews 3:12-14, Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.

James 5:13-20, Is anyone among you suffering? *Then* he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? *Then* he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; ¹⁵ and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. ¹⁹ My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, ²⁰ let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

James 1:2, 5, Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials . . . But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

James 1:3, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance

Romans 5:3-5, And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; ⁵ and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

1 Peter 1:6-8, In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, ⁷ so that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; ⁸ and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,

1 Peter 4:1-3, Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ² so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. ³ For the time already past is sufficient *for you* to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10, And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 1:4, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Isaiah 38:1-5, In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and said to him, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.’” ² Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, ³ and said, “Remember now, O LORD, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. ⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah, saying, ⁵ “Go and say to Hezekiah, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of your father David, ‘I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life.’”

1 Kings 17:17-24, Now it came about after these things that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became sick; and his sickness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸ So she said to Elijah, “What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!” ¹⁹ He said to her, “Give me your son.” Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the upper room where he was living, and laid him on his own bed. ²⁰ He called to the LORD and said, “O LORD my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?” ²¹ Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the LORD and said, “O LORD my God, I pray You, let this child’s life return to him.” ²² The LORD heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived. ²³ Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house and gave him to his mother; and Elijah said, “See, your son is alive.” ²⁴ Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.”

2 Kings 4:32-35, When Elisha came into the house, behold the lad was dead and laid on his bed. ³³ So he entered and shut the door behind them both and prayed to the LORD. ³⁴ And he went up and lay on the child, and put his mouth on his mouth and his eyes on his eyes and his hands on his hands, and he stretched himself on him; and the flesh of the child became warm. ³⁵ Then he returned and walked in the house once back and forth, and went up and stretched himself on him; and the lad sneezed seven times and the lad opened his eyes.

Psalms 35:12-14, They repay me evil for good, *To* the bereavement of my soul. ¹³ But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting, And my prayer kept returning to my bosom. ¹⁴ I went about as though it were my friend or brother; I bowed down mourning, as one who sorrows for a mother.

Philippians 1:9-11, And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; ¹¹ having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Colossians 1:9-14, For this reason also, since the day we heard *of it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,¹⁰ so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;¹¹ strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.¹³ For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son,¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Ephesians 1:15-23, For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which *exists* among you and your love for all the saints,¹⁶ do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention *of you* in my prayers;¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.¹⁸ *I pray that* the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,¹⁹ and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. *These are* in accordance with the working of the strength of His might²⁰ which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places*,²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.²² And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 3:14-21, For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love,¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.²⁰ Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us,²¹ to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.