

Priorities in Prayer

Series: *Praying with Paul*

March 23, 2025

Col. 1:9-14

Today, we begin a series called *Praying with Paul*.

Before I tell you more about the series itself, I'd like to note that ten years ago, in 2015, we did this same series. Does anyone who's been around Cornerstone long enough remember the significance of the year 2015 for this church?

It was the year construction was completed on this facility— Cornerstone Centre— and we moved in. After 17 years of meeting in rented spaces, we finally had a facility of our own by the grace and provision of God. And this facility would not just be for the Cornerstone congregation. It would also be our gift to the greater Markham-Stouffville community— for their use, benefit and blessing. The facility would be a tool allowing us to better serve and engage our community in Jesus' name, and build relational bridges with our local neighbours for the sake of God's kingdom.

While it was wonderful to finally have a facility, it also was a time of intensive change and transition for our staff and congregation. Moving into a new building and learning how to function in it would be a huge learning curve for us.

As we faced this transition into a whole new era of ministry, we sensed very keenly that our first priority had to be *prayer*— asking God and depending on him to do in, through and for us what we could never do without him. In this vein, we kicked off 2015 with a series about the prayers of the apostle Paul.

Fast-forward 10 years, and 2025 marks a new era of transition for Cornerstone. There have been changes in our senior staff, as Pastor Jeremy has joined our Executive Team as Discipleship Pastor after having served 19 years as our Group Life Pastor. My role has also shifted from Discipleship Pastor to Lead Pastor, as our founding and former Lead Pastor, Andrew, transitions into a pre-retirement role. He is currently on a 6-month sabbatical, and will return in July to serve as our Pastor-at-Large.

Along with that, we have several new staff who we're glad to have as part of the team. Our staff has expanded because our congregation has expanded, quite dramatically, as hundreds of people have joined us in recent years, and are at various stages in terms of their integration and engagement as part of this church family. In some ways, it almost feels like we have a new church. And all of this underscores the fact that Cornerstone is in a new era of transition.

God has brought Cornerstone so far over the years. And now the time has come for us to seek him together for what's next. And so, 2025 is a year we've dedicated to discerning the direction God has in mind for Cornerstone's next chapters. What are the next major moves God would have us make when it comes to living out the Vision and Mission he's entrusted to us as a local church?

We're confident that God will enable us to discern God's direction for Cornerstone as we make prayer a priority. Accordingly, one of our stated ministry objectives in 2025 is **discerning God's direction through prayer**.

And so, just like Cornerstone began a new era of ministry 10 years ago with an emphasis on prayer, we begin a new era of ministry in 2025 with an emphasis on prayer— with the same sermon series, in fact, Again, it's called *Praying with Paul*.

In the weeks ahead, we'll be exploring several of the apostle Paul's prayers that are recorded in the New Testament.

Known as the greatest missionary in Christian history, Paul spread the message of Jesus first to his fellow Jews, and then especially to non-Jews, known as Gentiles. He planted multiple churches during his missionary journeys, and the letters he wrote to various churches and individuals now make up about half of the New Testament.

Paul would endure sickness, beatings, years of imprisonment and repeated attempts on his life, but never wavered in his resolution to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to as many people as he could. Ultimately, it would cost him his life, but not before the good news of Jesus had taken root throughout the vast Roman Empire.

And permeating this apostle's remarkable career, was prayer. Paul was a person of prayer. Indeed, prayer was Paul's first priority. In his New Testament letters, Paul often describes what he prays, and how he prays.

Now if you were a basketball player, and you had the chance to get tips from LeBron James; if you were a cellist and had the chance to take lessons from Yo-Yo Ma; if you were a foodie and had the chance to get restaurant recommendations from Pastor Jeremy— wouldn't you jump at such a chance? (For those who didn't know, Jeremy is one of our resident foodies.)

If prayer actually matters to you— if you agree that prayer is vital for any disciple of Jesus— why wouldn't you want to hear everything Paul has to say about it, and make every endeavour to put it into practice?

Before we read today's passage, I'd like you to ask yourself this question:

When I pray, what do I typically pray about?

If you could be given a printout of every prayer you prayed in the past year, what requests would show up most frequently? Some of us may have to admit that our list wouldn't have much on it at all.

Those of you who have prayed more often may well find that your most frequent requests have been for good health, safe travel, financial or material provision, the well-being of family and friends, success in exams, and help with situations at work.

It's perfectly appropriate—indeed it's necessary— to pray about such things.

But how often and how earnestly do you pray for God to open doors for us to share the gospel in our community? Or for believers to become more and more like Jesus? Or for God's love to so permeate our hearts that our day-to-day lives become marked by profound gratitude, joyful obedience, and Christ-like self-sacrificial love for others?

It often doesn't occur to many Christians to make such things a matter of prayer. And yet the Bible shows us that the apostle Paul constantly did so, on behalf of the churches and Christians he associated with.

Why did he do so? Because these things reflect God's heart. They reflect God's *priorities*.

How might God change the way you relate to him, and how might God change your priorities in prayer and in life, as you study and apply Paul's prayers over the weeks of this series?

Today, we're going to talk about priorities in prayer on the basis of how Paul prayed for the Colossian Christians. Please follow along now as I read Colossians 1:9-14:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹

In these verses, Paul reveals three prayer priorities. First, we're going to consider:

1. The priority of praying continually and intentionally.

Paul tells the Colossian Christians, starting in verse 9:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will... ²

The first three words of our passage say, "For this reason..."

Here's a tip when you're reading the Bible. When you see a phrase like that, you need to go back to the preceding verses, and see what "this reason" is. In this case, in the preceding verses, we find Paul

¹ Colossians 1:9-14 (NIV)

² Colossians 1:9a (NIV)

thanking God for the Colossian Christians who are growing in faith, hope, and love. ³ “For this reason,” Paul says in verse 9, “we have not stopped praying for you...”

And the reason Paul doesn't stop praying for the Colossians is *because they've been doing so well in their walk with God*. They've been growing in faith, hope, and love.

To us, this may seem counterintuitive. After all, aren't times of crisis the times when we find ourselves so much more inclined to pray?

Let's be very clear— we absolutely need to pray in times of crisis. But in many of his recorded prayers, we find that when Paul hears of good news in the life of a church or an individual believer, he doesn't stop praying for them so he can move on to pray for more pressing concerns. On the contrary, he gives thanks for the good news, and continues praying fervently for more of the same.

Are the Ephesians growing in love? Yes. *Oh, God, thank you! Now let their love abound more and more!*

Are the Philippians finding joy because of the eternal hope they have in Christ? Yes. *Thank you, Lord! Keep filling them with your joy until it overflows and gloriously infects everyone they come into contact with!*

Do you see the pattern here? Even when there is great blessing, Paul doesn't stop praying. He prays continually. And so should we. The question we need to ask at this point is this: How can we make sure, practically speaking, that we don't stop praying, but rather pray continually for the things that matter most to God?

In telling the Colossians, “We have not stopped praying for you,” Paul is implying that he's made it a *matter of discipline* to pray for them during his regular times of prayer.

Look at what Paul told the church in Rome:

God knows how often I pray for you. Day and night I bring you and your needs in prayer to God, whom I serve with all my heart by spreading the Good News about his Son. ⁴

In verses like this, we see that Paul was intentional about his prayer life. He undoubtedly set aside regular times for prayer—day and night— during the course of his everyday activities. We too should set aside a time or times for prayer each day, and keep a prayer list to remind us who to be praying for.

Use whatever method or system works for you— your device, a calendar app, notifications, a paper journal, or Post-It Notes if that's how you roll. No matter how you do it, do it. It's not rocket science. It's a matter of intentionality. Bible scholar D.A. Carson hits the nail on the head when he says:

³ Colossians 1:3-8

⁴ Romans 1:9-10 (NLT)

Much praying is not done because we do not plan to pray. We do not drift into spiritual life; we do not drift into disciplined prayer. We will not grow in prayer unless we plan to pray. That means we must self-consciously set aside time to do nothing but pray.⁵

Speaking of prayer plans, in the latter part of this series, we will be making a **special prayer guide** available to you, based on the prayers of Paul. It will provide you with an intentional framework to put what we've been learning from Paul about prayer into practice. It will also help you to be praying for Cornerstone, as together we discern God's direction for this church through prayer.

Also, in terms of prayer plans, I shared last Sunday that on Saturday, May 24, we are having the first of two special **Prayer & Re-Envisioning** events here at Cornerstone. It's open to the entire congregation, and will be an important part of the process toward discerning God's longer-term direction for Cornerstone. It will include times of worship, personal prayer and reflection, sharing and prayer in table groups, as well as a chance for you to indicate your sense of how God is leading Cornerstone. We'd love for you to be a part of this special day. Sign-ups for the Prayer & Re-Envisioning event will begin soon, but for now, make sure to save the date.

Let's move on to the next prayer priority that we see in our passage:

2. The priority of praying to be filled with the knowledge of God's will.

This is the very heart and soul of Paul's prayer, as seen in verse 9:

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives...⁶

When we hear the phrase "God's will", many of us tend to think about the decisions we face in life: where to go to university; the search for the right job; the decision to get married; which church to attend; which home to buy; whether or not to move; how to invest our money; when or whether to have kids, and so on.

We absolutely need to seek God's guidance and direction in such decisions.

But when Paul prays for the Colossians to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, he has something much bigger and broader and deeper in mind. His prayer is that the Colossians would understand what matters most to God. What is God's agenda in this world? What are God's priorities for us as his people?

If you and I were to continually pray that God would fill us with the knowledge of his will, how do you think God will respond to our request? Surely, he will compel us to read, study and mediate on scripture. As the apostle Paul wrote elsewhere:

⁵ D.A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and his Prayers*.

⁶ Colossians 1:9 (NIV)

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.⁷

Having an ever-growing handle on the Bible is essential if you want to know God's will— what really matters to him—what his priorities and purposes are. What are you doing these days to grow in your knowledge of the Bible? In his book on prayer, Pastor Tim Keller writes that:

We only know who we are praying to if we first learn it in the Bible. And we know how we should be praying only by getting our prayer vocabulary from the Bible... Without immersion in God's words... we may not be responding to the real God but to what we wish God and life to be like.⁸

The very thrust of this series is to anchor our praying in the Bible— The God Story— so that our prayers can be driven by God's heart and priorities. It all comes back to *priorities*, right? How can we pray in line with *God's* priorities?

Well, it's a lot bigger deal to God, for example, that I'm growing in love for people than that I get into this or that academic program, because scripture says in 1 Peter:

Above all else, love each other deeply...⁹

But do my prayers reflect this priority?

It's a lot bigger deal to God that I develop a joyful, thankful heart than if I make this amount of money or have that level of material lifestyle, because the Bible says in 1 Thessalonians:

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.¹⁰

But do my prayers reflect this priority?

You see, the heart of God's will has been revealed in God's word, so in order to know and then live God's will, you need to grow in the knowledge of scripture.

To help you with that, Cornerstone has the Practical Guide Sheet for Bible Intake, (www.cornerstonechurch.ca/bibleintake) with tips and helpful resource recommendations for growing in the knowledge of scripture—how to *hear it, read it, study it, memorize it, mediate on it* and *apply it*. We'll leave the QR code for that up for a bit so you have a chance to get your phone out and capture this helpful guide sheet.

⁷ 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

⁸ Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, p. 54-55.

⁹ 1 Peter 4:8 (NIV)

¹⁰ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)

The next prayer priority we see from Paul in today's passage is:

3. **The priority of praying to live in a way that pleases Jesus.**

In verses 10-12 Paul says:

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will... so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord, and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father... ¹¹

The whole point of *knowing* God's will is so that we can *do* God's will. The whole point of *understanding* God's priorities and purposes is so that we can *put them into practice*, thereby pleasing and honouring Christ in every aspect of our daily lives.

What does it look like to live lives that please Jesus in every way? Well, we don't need to guess, because Paul tells us in our text. It looks like, first of all:

Bearing fruit in every good work (Col. 1:10b): The imagery of fruit-bearing in the Bible refers to God making our service to him and others impactful and productive. God put us here, and he's given each Christ-follower different gifts, abilities, strengths, passions, and callings, so that we can partner with him in making a difference in this world for the sake of his kingdom.

Next, Paul shows us that a life that pleases Jesus in every way involves:

Growing in the knowledge of God (Col. 1:10b): He's not referring to intellectual knowledge. He's talking about personal, experiential knowledge. He's talking about relationship.

Many of us see prayer as a means of getting *things* from God to make us happy. But Paul would have us pray that *God himself would become our happiness*. Prayer is not merely as a way to get *things* from God, but a way to *get more of God himself*.

Next, Paul shows us that a life that pleases Jesus in every way involves being strengthened with God's power to have:

Being strengthened in God's power so you will have great endurance and patience (Col. 1:11): Because guess what? Sometimes life as a disciple of Jesus gets hard. Paul himself suffered tremendous hardship for Christ's sake— far more than most of us will ever see in our lifetime— but do you know what he was able to say?

Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory [God] will reveal to us later.¹²

¹¹ Colossians 1:10-12 (NIV)

¹² Romans 8:18 (NLT)

Do we, like Paul, have a vision of our glorious eternal future with Christ that fills us with tremendous hope, and along with it, patient endurance? If you were here last Sunday, you'll recall that's exactly what we talked about in the sermon about the book of Revelation.

Finally, a life that pleases Jesus involves:

Giving joyful thanks to God (Col. 1:12): Being thankful is a choice, regardless of life's circumstances. There are always reasons to give thanks to God, no matter your situation in life. Surely, we can be thankful for our family and friends, the air we breathe, the jobs we have, the food on our tables, the homes we live in. If you begin to count your blessings, it can transform your outlook and attitude, and this pleases Jesus.

We should thank God for all of the things I just listed, because all good gifts come from God.

But those things— as wonderful as they are— pale in comparison to what Paul says is our best and ultimate reason to give joyful thanks to God. Look at verses 12-14, which say:

... and giving joyful thanks to God the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.¹³

Our reason to give joyful thanks to God, infinitely above all else, is that God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness, bringing us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, and qualifying us to be his holy people, now and forever.

Oh God, may the exceeding wonder of what you've done for us in Jesus not be lost on us! May it fill us afresh today with joyful thanksgiving unto you, and may that joyful thanksgiving mark our lives from day to day.

I'd like to close with a special invitation to be part of a prayer-focused ministry we are hoping to re-start here at Cornerstone.

The ministry I'm referring to is called **The Prayer Closet** [show slide sent in email; keep slide up for the duration of the message], which has been on hiatus since the pandemic with the exception of the series we did this past fall on the challenging subject of Biblical Sexuality. We made sure we had extra prayer cover for that series!

In Cornerstone's Prayer Closet ministry, people pray in a literal closet— namely the chair storage closet in the back of the worship hall, which is of course emptied of chairs on Sundays. The purpose of the Prayer Closet ministry is: ***Covering our Sunday services/ministries in prayer as they're happening.***

¹³ Colossians 1:12-14 (NLT)

Before the pandemic, each and every one of our worship services was covered in real-time prayer by people who were serving in the Prayer Closet. And I tell you, that real-time prayer cover brought a special power and fruitfulness to our worship services and other Sunday ministries. Not that God hasn't worked and moved through our services and other Sunday ministries since the Prayer Closet ministry was put on hiatus, but this year, we sense that it's time to bring it back on a weekly basis.

If God so leads you, you can be a part of the Prayer Closet ministry. It's very simple and doable. You can sign up for as many or as few shifts as you're able, for either the 9:30 or 11:30 service. We hope to have a least 2 people praying in the Prayer Closet during each and every worship service. When you're on for a shift, you'll be provided with a prayer guide, and you'll simply pray silently for the different aspects of the worship service and the other Sunday ministries going on in the building that day as they're happening. And as you pray quietly in your spirit, you'll be still able to hear and see everything that's happening in the worship service.

We are hoping to re-launch the Prayer Closet ministry on April 20th, which is Easter Sunday. In the meantime, we want to build a list of those who might like to participate. If you're interested in the possibility of serving in the Prayer Closet— whether on a more consistent basis or just on occasion— then I invite you to fill out the slip that was placed on your seat, and drop it into the offering bag when it goes around in a few minutes.

Take a moment now to fill out that slip if you're interested in the Prayer Closet.

Benediction

Modelling a way to pray Col. 1:9-14