
Praying in Tribulation

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

Devon Berry

Introduction

Tonight we continue our series on *Prayers of the Apostles*. In studying these prayers it is our objective to: 1) Explain how the NT Saints prayed as it is recorded in Scripture; 2) encourage a careful examination of our own praying; 3) exhort Christians to real, Biblical praying; and 4) expect personal transformation in our praying.

Our study this evening will be focused on 2 Corinthians 1:3-11. Let's begin with verse 1 and read together through verse 11 [READ PASSAGE]

Do you ever wonder what you are doing on your knees before God? Are you talking to yourself as your thoughts compete with your prayers in the echo chamber of your head? Are you drowsily meandering between moments of semi-lucidity and much needed sleep? Are you rambling the words and phrases that you have said a hundred times before and will now say for the 101st time because it is supper time and the children are waiting for you to utter your perfunctory words so that they can begin eating? Or...are you praying confidently to a God who hears AND *acts* in response to your prayers, in accordance to His will, for the good of those you pray for?

This evening we will consider prayer as a means of heavenly intervention – marked by an overt intention – resulting in a divine condescension. We will focus specifically on verse 11 as it orders our consideration of verses 3-10. Let's take a moment to pray and ask for wisdom before we go further. [PRAY]

Prayer as a Means of Heavenly Intervention

So what is prayer to you? How do you regard the act? I would guess for many of us, at least at times, prayer is something we do solely because we believe it is an act of obedience and in that obedience we somehow merit favor with God and pacify our own consciences...thereby slipping into some form of “legalism light” where we find ourselves in our own power and volition attempting to force God to see us as righteous. Why do I suspect this of you? Only because I know myself, and I'm betting that you may not be all that different than me. But is this how the apostles prayed? Did they believe prayer to be a perfunctory practice? An ineffective and unnecessary yet obligatory “Christian” exercise, similar to how many may view attendance to worship services? Let's look closer and see if this is the picture of prayer that is depicted.

You Help Us (vv. 8-10)

Let's begin by briefly considering the immediate context of this passage and Paul's request for prayer in verse 11. Paul is writing to the church at Corinth. Paul is known by, and knows, the Corinthian church well. Although their relationship has been strained, there is no doubt that Paul is addressing those whom he considers to be believers and therefore brothers and sisters in the Lord (cf 1:1).

In verse 11, Paul states, "You [the believers at Corinth] also must help us..." Why is Paul asking the Corinthians for help? A request, a plea, a command for help is usually indicative of some type of distress, difficulty, suffering or tribulation on behalf of the one who asks. What is Paul's tribulation in this instance?

He gives us some sense in verses 8-10 [READ]. While commentators have various ideas about what event specifically Paul is referring to here – most say the persecution received at the hands of Demetrius the silversmith recorded in Acts 19 is a likely scenario – whatever the case, the picture is obvious. Paul and company had recently endured serious trial. So serious that they "despaired" for their lives. Hear Paul *loud and clear*, the language packed into two verses is telling: "affliction, burdened beyond our strength, despairing of life, received the sentence of death, God who raises the dead, deadly peril, and the God who delivers (x 3)."

Have you been here? Have you with Paul despaired of your life...? Perhaps you have not been chased out of town by a mob, beaten to within an inch of your life, or lowered from a high wall in a basket, but indeed you have experienced trial and tribulation. Your children have walked away from everything you have endeavored to teach them over their childhood, your spouse has declared that he/she despises you and can no longer live with you, you are ostracized at your work place or at school because of your commitment to Christ, your health takes a severe turn for the worse, a loved one dies unexpectedly, the specter of financial failure haunts your day to day existence...

What have you done at these moments? What are you doing at this moment? Have you, as Paul, cried out to the body, "Help!" If not, why not

By Prayer (vv. 3-7)

So Paul calls out for Help! in the midst of his peril and difficulty. But Paul is more specific than simply hollering for help. He is not like the small child who has been tossed into the deep end of a pool and is thrashing about aimlessly crying out for help – no, although Paul realizes he is in over his head, He calls for effective help, he calls for the life preserver. He calls for prayer!

Paul, in his qualifying of the help he wants, reveals his own beliefs about what can benefit him and his coworkers in the ministry. Do you think about prayer in this manner? Do you see the prayers of others on your behalf as a real help? Again, I suspect that we often do not believe as Paul believes. We discredit the value of prayer – both our own and others. And in doing so render at least our own prayers faithless and fail to alert others to the manner of help we need. Consider carefully in how many situations it is impossible for others to help you in any physical way. All that can be given is prayer – but we do not see prayer as being as good, or as effective, as physical help and therefore if physical

help cannot be given, we do not call out for help to our brothers and sisters. May God help our unbelief.

So, how might we pray for those who are experiencing trial and tribulation? A means by which prayer may bring grace into the life of the believer is exemplified in verses 3-7 [Read]. We can pray for the “comfort” of our brothers and sisters. I want to take just a moment to consider this comfort a little more closely. Note several observations:

1. We can be comforted by God because of Christ, our mediator. In verse 3 God is the Father of Christ and through Christ has established our covenantal relationship with Himself – therefore, He can be a God of mercy, a God of comfort, to us.
2. Christ, himself, is our comfort. Verse 4 points...and then verse 5 illuminates: Verse 4, what is the comfort from God by which we ourselves are comforted? Verse 5, ...so through *Christ* we share abundantly in comfort – *even* as we share in His sufferings. Luke calls Christ the comfort of Israel (Luke 2), Isaiah describes Christ as one who will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick (Matt 12), and Paul tells us this is the one who has humbled himself to death, even death on a cross for God’s glory and our redemption (Phil 2). This is your gentle messiah, Christ, who can comfort you. Does comfort exist apart from Christ? No. We may employ, as Zechariah points out (Zec 10:2), “household gods who utter nonsense,” but these always and only lead to empty comfort, despair, and disillusionment, and ultimately, an eternity of discomfort – that is hell and its suffering. Verse 7 provides a stark contrast – Paul’s hope for the Corinthians is unshaken. Why? Because, even as they share in suffering, they share in comfort and this comfort, which comes from God through Christ in the midst of suffering, fosters perseverance in its recipients. Comfort supplied by others in the body and by Christ himself will help the believer and the body stand firm. This is why Paul’s hope is unshaken.
3. Many other Scriptures inform us of means by which comfort comes: Holy Spirit (Acts 9:31), the Scriptures (Rom 15:4, Ps 119:50), from God via unity with Christ and the body (Rom 15:5), from love (Phil 2:1), from grace (2 Thess 2:16), from individuals who refresh the hearts of the saints (Phm 1:7), from God’s rod and staff (Ps 23:4), from remembering that God is great, mighty, and able (Is 35:3,4; 40:1)
4. Finally, in verses 3-7, we are called to the same radical self-forgetfulness that Christ demonstrated on the cross even in the midst of our own need and receiving of comfort. You see, grace is never meant to be hoarded. When we are filled up with comfort we are to use this comfort to comfort others (4b). In our receiving of grace we are commanded to dispense grace by comforting others. Just as there is a vertical component to all of our horizontal sin, there is always a horizontal component to our vertical blessing.

So, when you pray for those in trial and tribulation, pray that they will receive comfort from those who have known comfort. Also pray that as they experience the comfort of Christ they will in turn use that comfort to comfort others.

So Paul has asked the Corinthian church for help. This help he desires is prayer. Although we will return to this thought in a moment, note that Paul does not regard prayer as an ineffective exercise that is carried out because it is a part of Christian tradition,

Paul does not indicate that prayer is good simply because it changes those who pray, nor does he say that prayer helps God. Rather, Paul states, “Help us by prayer.” Prayer helps those we pray for.

Marked by an Overt Intention

So That Many Will Give Thanks

Paul does not simply, point us to a scheme in which our prayers are humanistic and centered on our own human good. Although prayer “helps” people – the intended result is that God will be recognized by all as one who cares for His own. In giving God thanks, we humbly admit our dependence upon Him for all things. In giving Him earnest thanks we give Him glory and cause Him to appear large in our life. In a sense, Paul is simply repeating a principle here in verse 11 that has already been illustrated in this passage: *The life of the believer is to be lived in the continual consciousness of God’s sovereign grace in provision and sanctification* (Rom 8:28, Phil 1:6). How does this principle affect our reading of this passage? Consider what we learn about the experience of human affliction in just these eight verses (illustrate?): Our suffering may be a sharing in Christ’s suffering; Christ will provide comfort; others will have comfort to share; suffering may be used by God to make us more dependent on Him (see esp. v. 9b); and God knows how to deliver (rescue) His own, therefore God is “hopeworthy.” (And this is only one among many passages that speak to affliction). God’s truth makes sense of our lives because it is the Truth. We, therefore, must be consciously interpreting and understanding our lives according to His Word. When we do this, thanksgiving can occur, because we are now rightly understanding our reality. May our praying be inspired by the understanding that God in His sovereignty provides for our need, keeps at His work of sanctification, and helps us to rightly understand this world and interpret our experience.

On our Behalf

The prompting for thanksgiving to God is His action on the behalf of Paul and his co-workers. Paul wants to see God recognized in the help he receives. This presumes that others know how God has helped Paul, which presumes that Paul has told them. And so he has throughout his epistles spoken openly of his trial and hardship (2 Timothy 4; 2 Cor 11; etc.) and God’s rescue of him in a manner that accomplishes godly ends. The point here being – are you speaking with your brothers and sisters in a way that allows them to thank God on your behalf? If you are, do it more! If you are not, consider why. Perhaps you do not believe in a world, a reality, that is wholly ordered by our good, sovereign, and wise God. Therefore you do not see His good gifts when He gives them; or you misattribute the good in your life; or you believe that the “bad” is somehow evidence of a type of evil that impugns God. Believers must tell of all His work on their behalf (declarers of Good News) that others might rejoice and give thanks as they see God answering prayer and caring for His own.

Resulting in a Divine Condescension

(For) The Blessing Granted Us

When believers pray and see God's blessing in the lives of their brothers and sisters, they will give thanks. While "blessing" may come in many forms we see it in Paul and company's lives in at least three ways. The first is comfort, which we have already discussed to some extent. The second is hope and its messenger, deliverance. Verses 8 – 9a graphically depict great need for rescue, for salvation, for a deliverance from the hands of evil men. Undoubtedly, Paul and the others were praying to God for deliverance, that he would save their lives. And God does deliver them out of their mortal peril (v. 10) – but even if He had not, their hope, which is fixed on the *resurrected* Christ, reminds them that they serve the God who *raises* the dead. This is the God who has delivered, is delivering, and will, again in the future, deliver. This God is hopeworthy. Third, God also enables Paul to see at least one aspect of their suffering in terms of God's purposes, note v. 9b. Paul states that their affliction was to "make [them] rely not on [them]selves but on God who raises the dead." So at least three concrete ways that we can pray for brothers and sisters in affliction is that they would be comforted, that they would be encouraged by the hope of deliverance and that they might see God's practical work of sanctification in their present circumstance.

Through the Prayers of Many

Lastly we will note that the blessings that Paul anticipates receiving are, "granted [them] through the prayers of many." Not only does Paul earlier in v. 11 assume that real, practical help comes through prayer and therefore asks for help through prayer, but here asserts that future blessing will be granted *through* the prayers of many. This raises the question: If God is sovereign, how can prayer be effectual? If God chooses to deliver Paul, will He not regardless of the "prayers of many?" Asked in another way, if the church of Corinth had prayed that Paul be *not* delivered, would God have abandoned Paul?

Note first that this word "through," in verse 11, can be literally interpreted as "the channel of an act." In other words, God in His sovereignty uses prayer as a means by which he accomplishes His will. D.A. Carson has a helpful discussion of this issue in his book *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. Listen to this quote as he wrestles with the issue:

[It is] The perverse and the unbeliever [who] will appeal to God's sovereignty to urge the futility of prayer in a determined universe...but the faithful will insist that, properly handled, both God's sovereignty and his personhood become reasons for more prayer, not reasons for abandoning prayer. It is worth praying to a sovereign God because he is free and can take action as he wills; it is worth praying to a personal God because he hears, responds, and acts on behalf of his people, not according to the blind rigidities of inexorable fate.

It is also helpful to remember that the prayer we offer cannot be exempted from God's sovereignty. If I pray aright, God is graciously working out his purpose in me and through me, and the praying, *though mine*, is simultaneously the fruit of God's

powerful work in me through his Spirit. By this God-appointed means I become an instrument to bring about a God-appointed end. If I do not pray, it is not as if the God-appointed end fails, leaving God somewhat frustrated. Instead, the entire situation has now changed, and my prayerlessness, for which I am entirely responsible, cannot itself escape the reaches of God's sovereignty, forcing me to conclude that in that case there are other God-appointed ends in view, possibly including judgment on me and on those for whom I should have been interceding! (p. 165)

If time, consider Acts 12:6 - 18

So although there is a mystery in how precisely God weaves together the effects of the prayers of the righteous into the outworking of His sovereign will, it is clear that "the prayers of many" will be used by God to alter people's hearts, and earthly circumstances. Therefore, we should pray. In conclusion, what observations and applications can we make from this study.

Conclusion

Observation & Application

1. When you pray for those in affliction...
 - a. pray for comfort and that they would use the comfort they experience to comfort others;
 - b. pray that their hope would be grounded in a God who will deliver them, either temporally or eternally;
 - c. pray that they might view their affliction through the lens of God's truth and see both His providing and sanctifying grace in their lives; and
 - d. pray that others would see God's blessing in the life of the afflicted and give thanks to God on their behalf

You might pray, "Father, give comfort and hope of deliverance to _____ who is suffering. Help _____ to see your providing and sanctifying grace in his/her life. Allow us to see Your blessing in their life that we might glorify you with praises and thanksgiving.

2. Do not demean the act of prayer by believing wrongly about it. Prayer is a real means of help for the afflicted and is used by a sovereign God to fulfill His will and keep His promises to His people.
3. Understand that God is brought glory through the thanksgiving produced when others see His hand at work.
4. Knowing #'s 2 and 3, share your afflictions with others that they might intelligently pray with you and for you. Upon hearing of other's afflictions, make faith-full prayer a primary reaction. Then anticipate His good and wise blessing. When you see His deliverance, let others know! That they might thank Him on your behalf.

Notes:

1. God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in Scripture to reduce human responsibility.
2. Human beings are responsible creatures – that is, they choose, they believe, they disobey, they respond, [they pray], and there is moral significance in their choices; but human responsibility never functions in Scripture to diminish God's sovereignty or to make God absolutely contingent (Carson, p. 148)

