

# Prayer Commended

Hebrews 13:18-19

*Halifax: 18 August 2024*

## Introduction:

Today in our sermon series in Hebrews, we reach the concluding sections.

- Here we find a personal prayer request from the author related to his relationship with the Hebrews.
- Then we have a benediction that bestows the benefits of the glorious Saviour on these Hebrews—the Saviour that this book is all about.
- Then, there is an exhortation to receive this letter of exhortation,
- And finally, there is an update and a passing on of greetings.

We will get to each of these subjects in turn.

- I am looking forward to each one.

Today we will look at the first subject about prayer.

- The verses we will be considering are Heb 13:18-19, but I will begin reading from verse 8 as I will be referring back a bit to things we have recently considered.

Here is the word of God.

**Heb 13:12-17: Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. <sup>13</sup> Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. <sup>14</sup> For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. <sup>15</sup> Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips, giving thanks to His name. <sup>16</sup> But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. <sup>17</sup> Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. <sup>18</sup> Pray for us; for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things desiring to live honorably. <sup>19</sup> But I especially urge *you* to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner.**

Thanks be to God for His holy and infallible word.

With verse 18, the author says something about himself for the first time.

- That is unusual. In the other epistles, the author usually identifies himself and verifies that he is an apostle or someone who speaks the word with authority.
- In most letters, that was very important and necessary, but Hebrews is different.
  - Since it was written to Jews to defend the faith against Judaism to which some of the Hebrew Christians were tempted to revert, the author expounds the OT scriptures.
    - When he wanted to speak about Jesus' reigning, he went to Psalm 110 where the Father said, "**Sit at my right hand until you make all of your enemies your footstool.**"
    - When he wanted to speak about what Jesus said, he did not quote what the apostles heard, but appealed to the prophetic text in Psalm 40 where Jesus said, "**I have come to your will, O God, in the volume of the book it is written of me.**"
- It is clear as well, from these words, that they knew who he was—that he had ministered to them in the past because he speaks of being "restored" to them.

- So he had no need to speak of his credentials as was often necessary when letters were written that were based on apostolic authority.

So what was his great concern as soon as he speaks of himself?

- He wants them to pray for him and his ministry companions.

### **I. “Pray for us—” a matter of great importance!**

A. Prayer is ubiquitous in the New Testament. It is found everywhere.

1. Injunctions to pray (like this one) are found again and again in the New Testament.

- a. This man who wrote to these Hebrews who were struggling in their faith and not maturing as they should still wanted their prayers for him.
- b. We see the great apostle Paul with no delusions that his prayers or those of his colleagues were sufficient. He craved the prayers of all, even the least.
- c. It is touching to see how our Lord urged His disciples to prayer—and rebuked them when they were negligent.
  - Do you hear His rebuke to you through the scriptures, or has your heart grown callous to the call for prayer. Does it irritate you for me to bring it up and make you want to call me a legalist?
  - If this is what legalists do, then Jesus must be a legalist.

2. Besides this, testimonies of prayer for others are found all through the New Testament.

- a. Paul often puts them in the first chapter of his letters, assuring the people that he does not cease to remember them in his prayers.
  - Sometimes he even solemnly testifies with an oath that he is praying for them.
- b. Our Lord Himself also testifies of His prayers for His disciples and for the whole church.
  - To Peter, He says, “I have prayed for you.”
  - Hebrews tells us that He is a priest who ever lives to make intercession.
  - And His apostles testify of Him going off in the morning to pray—or staying up through the night to pray.
- c. Think of the great men in the Old Testament as well.
  - Nehemiah and Daniel were men of much prayer.
  - Many of David’s prayers are recorded for us—
  - We read Solomons great prayer in 1 Kings 8.
  - What about Moses? He set up a tent to of meeting to meet with God.

B. Prayer is a grand thing because it gets God to act for our benefit.

1. Think of it!

- Jesus has given us access to our heavenly Father who does whatever He pleases in heaven and earth.
- We were cut off from Him by our sin, but now we can come to Him in Jesus’ name—relying on Jesus as our great high priest.

- He promises that He will hear us and that He will act for us!
  - We are securing the sweet, wise, powerful excellent hand of the Almighty to do what is best for us.
    - This is the goal of prayer—what it does: it brings God into our lives to act in our behalf.
    - We want communion with Him where He is actively blessing us to live more and more for Him. Prayer does this.
  - We are guaranteed that He will.
    - James 5:16 tells us that **The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.**
      - And indeed it does!
      - When you are spiritually out of sorts and your heart becomes burdened and you cry out to God, very often He sends you relief!
      - Likewise, when you are spiritually in touch and you pray, how often like Moses, you get to see more of God and to grow in grace and love.
2. God often does not act without our prayers.
- James 4:2 says: **You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.**
    - That is perfectly clear.
    - You don't have what you need to live faithfully because you don't ask for it.
  - If the church as a whole were praying, we would see the hand of God moving across our land in a mighty way.
    - Our nation, our church, our families, and our personal lives would be in a much better condition.
      - Jesus' disciples could not cast out a demon because they had not been praying and fasting.
      - He pled with them to pray on the night He was betrayed but they slept and then they forsook Him.

TRANS> So we see that the writer of this letter to the Hebrews wanted prayer because he knew that God acts in our behalf when we pray.

## **II. Why is it that God does not prefer to act in our behalf without our prayers?**

A. It is because prayer puts us where He wants us to be.

- It brings us into the kind of relationship that He wants us to have with Him.
- Prayer is a large part of what that relationship involves.
  - We have seen that He wants a sacrifice of praise from us—the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name. He wants us to adore Him and to delight in what He has done and to actually praise and thank Him.
- But remember the two words that were key in bringing that sacrifice of praise?
  - We are to do it “by Him.” By Jesus.
  - The Jews came looking to the temple and its sacrifices for reconciliation with God—we come looking to Jesus...

- We come praying that by Him we would have acceptance and forgiveness, and that we would receive His life-giving grace and fullness so that we can love Him and adore Him and want Him and love others and do good to them.
- B. What are some of the things that characterises the lives of those who pray—things that are part of a praying person’s relationship with God that He wants us to have?
1. Dependence on God. He wants us to know that everything we have—especially new life with Him—is from Him.
    - He wants the people He loves to look to Him and to know that they need Him as their God—unlike the devils who claim that they don’t and who tell us that we don’t—that we can get on better without Him.
  2. He wants us to be mindful that it is all of grace through His Son that we have access to Him.
    - When we have true prayer before the true God, there is an ever-growing awareness that we really only can come in Jesus’ name.
      - Sin has made us unfit, and it is only by Him.
      - The Father wants our love to grow for His Son as our Saviour—and to see His goodness in sending Him.
  3. He wants us to want His will—to want to see His glory—to see Him glorified in the world—
    - He loves to have us ask for these things as an expression of our growing love for Him.
    - That yearning for His glory and will to be done is strengthened not only because we ask Him to increase it and He does, but also because the very act of praying for it makes us more aware of how excellent it is for our Father to be honoured and glorified.
  4. He wants us to recognise His hand when He does work.
    - A praying person is a thankful person.
      - Think of the ungodly who receive food and safety day after day without asking for it. They have it without seeing God’s mercy and goodness.
        - They have it without recognising or caring that He provided it.
        - They have no thankfulness and no growth in their love for Him.
- C. All this is essential for our relationship with Him to be repaired from its ruin by the fall into sin.
- Sin separated us from a relationship of dependency on God—it severed what the relationship of man is supposed to be with God. It cut off our prayers.
    - He wants our love for Him as our God to be restored.
    - He wants to be visible to us in our lives—an active dependency that is living by His help and grace.
  - Sometimes, He deliberately does not answer our specific requests—say for healing or even for deliverance from persistent anger or struggles with addictions...

- Why?
- He does not answer because He has higher aims.
  - He knows us well enough to know that if He delivered us from the sins that bother us, we would stop praying because we are too easily satisfied.
    - If He leaves us to wallow a bit, we will continue to seek Him.
    - He would rather that we were more concerned about the root of those sins than the outward behaviour that embarrasses or inconveniences us.
      - These sins that bother us have a hold on us because He does not—we do not yet love Him—we are not yet adoring Him with praise and thanksgiving.
      - If we were, those idols and addictions would lose their grip on us.
      - If He takes them away, we will have nothing to expose the fact that our love for Him and praise of Him needs to improve!
  - The same with trials of health or wealth or relationships...
    - If these were resolved, we would see little need to pray and have we would be content to go on with little communion with Him.
  - This is not to say that someone who has persistent trials is further from God than someone who does not.
    - God works that way in weak Christians, but He also works that way in very strong Christians like Paul or Moses who had major trials. And what about Job?
- As I said at the outset, by prayer we are securing the sweet, wise, powerful excellent hand of the Almighty to do what it best for us.
  - He knows what that is better than we do.

TRANS> Prayer is very important. But there is something else that is striking in this passage.

### **III. The author asserts that because he and his companions in ministry are sincere, the Hebrews can be sure of the effectiveness of their prayers for them!**

- Look at what he says (v. 18): **Pray for us; for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things desiring to live honorably.**
    - The word “for” in the phrase “for we are confident” is significant here!
- A. Does he mean that prayers are more likely to have the desired result when the person we pray for is truly seeking to live for God?
- Yes! That is exactly what he means.
1. When you see someone who is yearning to do the will of God, that is a person to pray for most of all.
    - Sometimes we think we don’t need to pray for a faithful disciple or for a faithful minister—“They are doing fine, why should I pray for them?”
      - But the truth is, they are the ones that Satan will be after the most.

- They are the ones that potentially have the greatest impact for honouring God and leading His church or if they are a new believer, for setting an example of beautiful zeal.
2. If the glory of God was more important to us, and envy were not so prevalent, we would be a lot more eager to pray for the most sincere, most faithful, Christians.
    - We would love what they do for God’s kingdom and glory and we would want them to do it more and to do it better.
    - When we don’t pray for them, we are left, as it seems is often the case today, with no strong examples to follow.
    - All our prayers are focused on the ones who are going astray, and who have hardened their hearts.
      - We *are* supposed to pray for them, and to pray passionately, but we should also pray—and perhaps pray even more—for those who are doing well.
- B. Let’s look a little more closely at how he describes himself and his companions in ministry as a suitable subject of prayer.
1. First, he says to pray for them because he is confident that they have a good conscience.
    - Having a good conscience means that you are doing what you believe to be right. You are not knowingly living in disobedience.
  2. He adds that they are seeking to live honourably—or uprightly.
    - The word actually means to live beautifully—to be a sweet savour for Christ.
    - He is confident that they really do want to be beautiful for God.
- C. Do you see how knowing that would make you want to pray that God would help them?
1. Here is a person who really wants to be beautiful for God—do you think God will be interested in helping that person?
    - Probably quite a bit more than the one whose main desire is for more money or more success.
    - God will be eager to help the one who is trying to live beautifully in marriage or the one who is seeking to honour Him by serving others.
      - Will God be pleased to answer prayers for such persons to succeed in what they are doing? He certainly will.
  2. Take the opposite.
    - The Bible says that if we regard iniquity in our heart—if we are content to leave sin there and to be friendly to it and feed it...
      - To go after our sinful passions and desires—is that a person God is going to help to succeed in what they are pursuing?
      - Of course not.
    - We are even told that we must not pray for a person who has committed the sin unto death—
      - Sin that they will not repent of, even when confronted, and has rightly brought them under church discipline.

- John says not to pray for a person like that. Don't pray that God would bless them and prosper them.
  - You can certainly pray that He will break them and bring them to repentance, and that you and others will be effective in calling them repent... in helping them to work out their sin...
    - But until they want to do that, you have to pray against them and what they desire instead of for them.
3. Keep in mind as well that you cannot expect God to answer your prayers if you are not living for Him.
- There are many examples of this.
    - We sang it in Psalm 66:18: **Pray for us; for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things desiring to live honorably.**
    - I Peter 3:7 has a word for husbands: **Husbands, likewise, dwell with *them* with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as *being* heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.**
      - If your prayers are not being answered, this might be something to check.
    - Until you are ready to repent and start praying that you would please Him and honestly seeking to do that, your prayers will not be heard.
      - You need to see that you are the problem, not other people, not God, not your bad childhood—not any of that—it is you.
      - You need to repent and ask God to help you to repent and start living for Him. That is a prayer that He will hear and answer.
- D. All of you, let's pursue what God has just told us is pleasing to Him in Hebrews 13:15-17.
1. Let's desire to offer the sacrifice of praise, the fruit of our lips confessing His name.
    - And let's desire to do good and to share.
    - And let's desire to obey those who rule over us—to receive the word and be persuaded by it and then to live it out and to submit to them when they ask us to do something legitimate—to do it well.
  2. If we sincerely want to please God, we can pray confidently for one another.
    - God will hear and answer such prayers, and He will be glorified.

TRANS> And one more thing before I close.

#### **IV. Our text encourages you to pray for ministers that they might minister to you.**

- As a minister, I really want to ask you to do this—pray for me and the elders here.
- A. You see in verse 19 that he especially asks them to pray for him.
- **But I especially urge you to this [this prayer] that I might be restored to you the sooner.**
    1. He does not tell us what needed to happen for this restoration to occur.
      - But what we know is that there are many things that can hinder ministry.

- Satan is always looking to hinder it.
  - And whatever is keeping it from happening is something to pray against.
2. Pray that we elders would be more effective.
- I believe that we want to minister effectively and faithfully to you.
    - I know that I want to preach in a way that you will be benefitted, but I desperately need God's help.
  - My ministry cannot be effective without His help.
    - It cannot be wise or beautiful or useful.
    - It cannot point you to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit the way it should.
    - It cannot bring things to you that you need to think about or need to do that you do not want to think about or do.
      - Whatever is in the way needs to be gotten out of the way so ministry can happen. Things are always in the way. Prayer is always needed.
- B. And please, it will do no good to sit here today and have God's Spirit show you that you ought to pray for us and to feel good that God has spoken to you...
- Unless you actually do it.
  - Good intentions to pray are not the same as praying.
    - Like James says, you can have nice wishes for a hungry man to be warmed and filled, but if you don't do anything, your wishes are of no use.
- C. But be encouraged.
- If you do pray, God will act and you will grow in your relationship with Him and will be used through your prayers to bring glory to Him and blessing to His people.
  - You will have much better ministry from the session if you pray for better ministry.
    - If you don't, you won't have because you did not ask.
- Conclusion:** What a wonderful thing prayer is!
- Let's make good use of it.