

**THE PRAYERS OF THE EPISTLES**  
**Personal Prayer Life**  
**Dr. George O. Wood**

The theme I've been working on since the first of the year, I'm about near the conclusion of this particular theme. It's the subject of prayer and especially as it relates to the New Testament. I began by looking at the prayer life of Jesus. The times that he prayed, the prayer teachings of Jesus, the personal example of his prayer. We looked at prayer in the early church. We looked at prayer in the life of the apostle Paul and the major teachings in Paul's letters on the subject of prayer.

Tonight we're looking at the prayers of Hebrews, the writer of Hebrews. We're not sure who the writer of Hebrews is. I'm always cautious. Many people think it was Paul. Some think it was Barnabas. Others think it was Silas. Others think it was Luke. Some think it was Priscilla or maybe even Phoebe. We have female ideas of authorship, male ideas. Nobody seems to know who wrote Hebrews.

Then James and Peter and John and Jude. These are generally called the general epistles. One of the things that unifies all of these letters, these general epistles is that they are written at a time when the church is going through a great deal of difficulty and suffering. That seems to be a common thread that unites them all. And therefore one expects when people are going through difficult times in their life to find people in such places praying. When you open therefore to the general epistles to these letters that I have indicated, sure enough you find abundant references to prayer.

There are some twenty passages in all in these letters. As I took time to categorize them and identify them, I really felt that rather than trying to force them into some artificial mold of a topical examination we would just take some moments this evening to look at these specific passages one by one and see as we look at them how they're relating to our own life and how we're employing them for prayer.

If I have learned anything from going through this series in the New Testament on prayer is that there is a great resource in the New Testament itself to guide and to shape our prayer life. We don't have to be in the dark about how we are to be praying. The New Testament itself provides abundant example of what our prayer life should consist of.

I might add too that it seems to me by going to the New Testament on prayer and now coming to the conclusion of this series that there is a ying-yang effect to the prayer life as well. I mentioned that in services this morning when I spoke on "Remember and Forget," that there is balance in life.

In prayer, the two things that always surface in terms of requests are that number one, God would change our circumstances. We identify this so often as a miracle. We're asking the Lord continually in our praying to change our circumstance. Every one of us has asked God to do that at one time or another in our life. How many have seen God directly change circumstance in our life that was directly attributable to prayer? A great many.

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But there is a fall back position. A yang to the ying so the speak. God is not always obligated to change the circumstance. How many of you have prayed and God hasn't done with the circumstance what you asked him to do? More hands went up that time!

So what are we doing in that kind of season of life? We're saying the fall back position, "God, if you're not changing the circumstance, change me in the circumstance. It's me now that you're going to work on. You're not changing my externality, so change my internalities. Some of the greatest experiences I've ever had in life are when God has said no to my externalities and done a number on the inside of me.

First reference to prayer in the general epistles is found in Hebrews 4:14-16. *"Therefore since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess."* Gone through the heavens... Jesus did this without the space shuttle! We're serving a miraculous Christ. I like what Chuck Smith said, "Once I accepted the fact of Genesis 1:1 'God created the heavens and the earth,' I didn't have a problem with anything else in the Bible."

That's a wise comment. If he did indeed rise again from the dead then he has gone into the heavens. What is he doing there? The writer of Hebrews tells us what he is doing: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize or sympathize with our weaknesses. But we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are. Yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Whoever is writing Hebrews is addressing the letter to people who are beginning to peel out of their Christian commitment. These are Jewish believers who come to faith in Christ and now the times are getting tough. So serious has the problem become of their going back into Judaism that this letter has come along. It is reminding them that in Jesus Christ we have a better priesthood, a better covenant, a better altar, a better sacrifice. One of the things that's being said in this particular passage is that Jesus as the high priest differs from that of the faith of which these people have come. In the old covenant there were barriers for the high priest. The barrier was for example that the high priest could only go into the holy of holies once a year. There was a barrier to getting close to a high priest. For if you were in the state of uncleanness ritual impurity you could never get near the high priest for you would defile him. So the high priest was sort of a representative of rigid, unbending, moral purity and authority.

Now we're being told as the writer of Hebrews communicates to these people who are being tempted to go back to the old way "Look! In Jesus Christ we do have a high priest and he's not limited in going into the holy of holies just once a year. But he's always here. We cannot defile him with our uncleanness. In fact the times when we're unclean is when we most need God. That's when the Old Testament required us to be away from God. To be away from the temple. To emphasize and underline our impurity with God. But it's in the midst of that impurity that we need the Lord. Therefore we have one in the heavens – Jesus – who is able as high priest to empathize with us. We can therefore draw near and obtain from the throne of grace mercy. It's such a marvelous encouragement to us because I know and you know there has been wrong done in our life or sin committed the last person we want to talk at that particular moment is the Lord himself. This scripture is telling us, when you feel least like coming to me, come to me. I am one who is able to empathize with you and feel with you.

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The second passage on prayer in the Hebrews letter is in 5:7-10 “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears.” That’s something about the Lord’s life that we’re not told in the gospel. He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears. This scripture is saying that Jesus prayed from the gut of life. He was crying and he was effusive in his emotional output and in his prayer. “...loud cries and tears to God who could save him from death. He was heard because of his reverent submissions. Although he was a son he learned obedience from what he suffered and once perfect he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be a high priest in the order of Melchizedek.”

There are only two times in the Bible we are told Jesus wept. One time is here. The other time is Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus, John 11:35. Then he wept over Jerusalem, Luke 19:41. He wept over an individual. He wept over a city. And Hebrews 5:7 tells us that he wept over the world. His tears for Lazarus are as a stream. His tears for Jerusalem are as a river. His tears for the world are as an ocean. He wept that God would spare him. Save him from death lest he had to lay down his life for the world. Jesus did not seek the cross as a masochistic kind of a thing. He sought to avoid the pain. And yes he laid down his life willingly because it was his Father’s will.

This little phrase, “He cried out with loud cries and tears.” We are encouraged ourselves to not just pray with our head but to pray with our emotions. The Hebrews would call it praying with the kidneys! We use heart but they used different parts of the body to describe deep-seated emotional feeling. He prayed with deep-seated emotional feeling. He prayed to be delivered from things. Even though he knew them to be God’s will.

Are there times when God says no to our prayer? He said no to Jesus’ prayers. But he was heard. That’s the important thing. He was heard but God the Father did not answer him in the way that he asked.

We’re always heard when we pray. God may give us an answer that at that moment we prefer another one. But he was heard. God honored him and taught him through his struggle of life reverent submission.

That tells me an awful lot about my prayers.

Then there’s a third reverence to praying in the letter to the Hebrews. Chapter 7. Again there’s a reference to the priesthood, verse 23-25. “Now there were many of those priests since death prevented them from continuing in office. But because Jesus lives forever he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives to intercede for them.”

Couple that with another verse from Hebrews 9:24 “For Christ did not enter a man made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one. He entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence.” Two key things emerge from Hebrews 7 and 9. They are related to the fact at Jesus is making intercession for us and is now appearing on our behalf in God’s presence. Intercessors.

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This scripture is telling us we've got a friend whose not only in the jury room when they're deliberating. Scriptures is saying we have a friend in the heavens. Sin crushes us and beats us down and keeps reminding us we can't approach God and we're no good and we don't belong there. All that kind of stuff. But the scripture is calling us that we have one in the heavens who is going to bat for us. He's not going to bat on the basis of our righteousness but his righteousness. We have a friend in the heavens. God's not against us. He's for us. Jesus is interceding for us.

Scriptures tell us that in addition to our praying about something Jesus intercedes for us in the heavens and Romans 8:26 says the Holy Spirit intercedes for us in the heart. We do not know how to pray as we ought but the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with words too deep to be uttered. So we've got some very important persons pulling for us. God the Spirit and God the Son. Joining with us and witnessing in agreement to our prayer.

It's great encouragement when we pray. Have you ever wondered what is Jesus praying for in the heavens for me? Obviously the gospel tells a lot about what he was praying for us. He was praying that we might be with him where he is. He's certainly prayed that we would be saved. Can you imagine us showing up in heaven and Jesus never prayed for us to get there? Everything in the kingdom of God is a result of prayer. Jesus prayed for you and me so that we would be in his presence. He's praying that we might be one. And I think he's praying too that we won't fail. That everything that he wants to accomplish in our life will come to pass.

Christ has entered heaven on our behalf to appear in God's presence for us so that we have someone in the heavens tonight. And, by the way, the heavens are not empty or unoccupied. Jesus is there.

Another reference to prayer is found in Hebrews 13. A lot of references to prayer in all of Hebrews. 13:15 "Through Jesus therefore let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name." When you and I think of sacrifice we immediately think of something we give up. Something we kill at an altar, so to speak. But here when "sacrifice" is used it isn't something we do because we have to give up something else to do it. The writer of Hebrews were addressing these people who were familiar with temple rituals. One of the things they no longer had as Christians and in fact probably the day Hebrews was written they didn't have as Jewish people either was the temple was destroyed. In 70 A.D. The temple was destroyed. In every single Jewish day there was a sacrifice offered on behalf of all the people at nine in the morning and another sacrifice offered on behalf of all the people at three o'clock in the afternoon. As the sun had risen and as the sun had set there was a national sacrifice for all the people. These were times of prayer.

Peter for example is going to the temple at the hour of prayer, Acts 3. These people can no longer go to that hour of prayer, can no longer participate in the daily sacrifice. What the Hebrews writer is suggesting is you can't go to the temple any more and you can't kill the animal anymore. But what you can do is at the hour of prayer you can offer up instead of an animal you can offer up your praise to God. That's a far better sacrifice.

So make a regular occasion the writer of Hebrews is saying that at intervals of that day stop and give thanks to God. Whether it's like Daniel three times a day or whether it's a pious Jew five

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times a day or whether it's an observant person twice a day. But whatever. Offer up praise to the Lord as a sacrifice.

Then Hebrews 13:18-19 another reference to prayer. "Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscious and desire to live honorably in every way. I particularly urge you to pray so that it may be restored to you soon." There's a world of difference between the two prayer requests the writer throws out. The first is Pray for us. The other is Pray that I'll be restored. It's interesting that the second one involves a particular deliverance. Perhaps he is in prison or in some dangerous situation. But before he asks people to pray that God would change his circumstance, he asks them to pray for him because we are more important than the changing of the circumstance we are in.

So it's appropriate that we pray for the wholeness of someone else than simply that they have a change happen in their life. Pray for us.

Then the last reference in Hebrews 13:20-21. One of the beautiful benedictions in the scripture. "May the God of peace who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep equip you with everything good for doing His will. May He work in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ to whom be glory for ever and ever." Here again is that New Testament emphasis of asking God to do something in us, not coming to God primarily with a request that he'll change our external circumstances. But saying, Lord do something in me.

And what do you want? Everything that is good for doing your will. Is anything in our life out of God's will? Any attitudes that we have out of God's will? Any relationships out of God's will. Any emotions out of God's will. God do everything good in me according to your will and equip me to do what is right and is pleasing to you.

I link Hebrews 13:21 with Paul's great phrase in Ephesians 6 where he talks about the equipment of the person who goes into spiritual war. Here's how I would more even add to Hebrews 13:21 that we may be equipped with everything good. Lord, when I awake in the morning, put truth around my waist. Put righteousness over my heart. Put the gospel of peace on my feet. Put a shield of faith out there in my life so that I won't be overcome by life's circumstances. Put good protection on my head the helmet of salvation. Lead me forth, praying in the spirit and fighting the war this day that needs to be fought this day to win. Equip me to do your will.

We leave the writer of Hebrews to go to references of prayer in James. James 1:5-8 is a length passage. James writing to Christians that are dispersed and scattered. In fact when he opens his letter which is a letter which emphasizes our work. He says, "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." That's a new name for the Christian church. Not that we're divided into twelve tribes. But that we have as the body of Christ assumed the corporate identity of the new Israel to God. Scattered in the world. He says, "If any of you lack wisdom he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him. But when he asks he must believe and not doubt because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double minded man unstable in all he does."

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Here James is not talking about deciding whether you're going to be in God's will whether you join a cult or not. He's talking about Christians who are going through great trial in their faith and need to make decisions. Like how can I still keep my job when they are requiring practice of me that are borderline? When do you cross over the borderline? At what point do you have to leave your employment because what you're being asked to do conflicts with your Christian faith. At what point do you disclose information when you are asked questions if you're in a persecuted society? If you're a Christian who is living behind a bamboo or iron curtain. You're being asked questions about what you're teaching your children. How do you respond to the authorities? Christians under pressure need wisdom. When we are in relational pressure as Christians and we can't see our way out of the mazes we find ourselves in. We're tempted to go off at the mouth in all kinds of directions and further get snafued in our own system. How do we respond to those things?

James the brother of Jesus who was called camel knees, because he reputedly spent so much time in prayer that there were thick calluses on his knees. He was known as a man of wisdom as we see from Acts 15. He was the one who presided over this huge church debate on whether or not Gentiles should be counted as full members of the church. He had a lot of wisdom. The thing we need to do when we're facing perplexing situations is we need to do in prayer and get a sense of direction about them.

I would challenge all of us going in to perplexing situations, it helps to see a counselor. I recommend that highly. It helps to get advise from friends and from people we trust and spiritual people and the like. But in all that process, get to do first. Get to God foremost.

I've found that there is an unerring sense from God, the Holy Spirit is very faithful and he gives great impressions about what you should do that line up with his will. You learn as a Christian to listen to that voice of the Lord. Giving a sense of direction through prayer. When he says to do it, then do it. Don't waver back and forth.

James 4 says "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" I don't like that. I'm thinking of crossing that out of the scripture. It puts the blame on me and I don't want the blame. "You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet but you cannot have what you want. When you kill and covet and are angrily demanding another person to change you're never going to get what you want." You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on pleasures." Pleasures mean getting your way and feeling good about it.

Scripture is telling us that God calls us to peace and not conflict. If we're heavy in contention in our life and we're heavy into criticism in our life and we're heavy into negativity in our life toward somebody else, the problem is not with tem. The problem is in ourselves. We are into heavy conflicts.

That doesn't say the other person doesn't bear some responsibility. But it's to say if there is no peace in our own life. If we have let that conflict with the other person rob us of our own serenity and security in God, then we bear some responsibility for letting that happen. Maybe instead of just pressing our own way, through bull-headedly in a situation, trying to make things

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happen by fighting and quarreling, nagging, criticizing, and condemning, we need to back off and say, Lord, what do you want here?

God calls us to peace and not to conflict. So when we're at odds with somebody or with a group of people chances are the reason there is conflict in our own hearts is that we have not really worked it though first of all in prayer. When we don't work it first through in prayer it spills out in a lot of other ways.

James 5:13-18 a nice non threatening scripture. "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not rain for three and a half years. Again he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops."

Here is a scripture that has really had the interpretations put to it. If any of you are sick, let him call for the elders of the church and anoint with oil. The Romans Catholics have the doctrine of extreme unction out of this. That is that this is calling for up to the moment of death a priest to administer the last rites, the last sacrament that you are given in the church. The sacrament of the last rites. Where your ears and eyes and I believe hands are anointed with oil as preparation for death.

There are two problems with that position. One is that it is not the priests that are being called for. Priest is only used of Christ's ministry, never of human ministry. So it's not priests being called for it's presbyters – elders. Secondly, they're being called not to help the person die but to pray that they'll get well. So it's not the last rites. It's the healing rites.

That position doesn't quite square with the scripture.

Then there's John Calvin who said this was for the apostolic age. The apostles came and laid hands upon people and they were raised up and we expect that in the apostolic age but not now.

We're not talking about apostles. We're talking about presbyters. And John Calvin believed in presbyters. That's how we got the Presbyterian church. It's built on the Presbyterian model of church government. The model of eldering. These were presbyters not apostles.

Then there's the faith confession people. They come along and say, Here's a scripture that says when you pray and there's faith the person will always be healed and if they're not healed it's because they haven't had faith. But the problem is the scripture's not talking about the sick person's faith, it's not about the elder's faith. So since the faith confession people send their elders in the body of Christ whenever they lay hands upon people and pray for them to be well, everybody ought to be healed because they're doing it – if that view of scripture is correct.

Then there are those who finally give up and say, We're not talking about praying for the sick at all. We're talking about anointing with oil and being a good medical practitioner. In those days when you were ill, when you were sick, people brought oil, poured the salve on the part of the

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body that hurt and it worked. So we're talking about not faith healing. We're talking about medicine.

Where do we wind up in this. The fact that when we are to call, not to disappear in the hospital and wait to see how many days it takes before anybody finds out. That happens and some people want to be left alone. But the scriptural pattern is when we're called by somebody we'll come and pray for you. We'll get elders or whatever to come and pray. That prayer of faith. Is this to suggest there are prayers that aren't prayers of faith? Yes and no. I suspect every prayer is a prayer of faith because it takes faith to address God. But there are prayers and then there are prayers. So when we come to pray for the sick we're not to go through some routine motion kind of a deal. We really pray and believe. "God, your word says pray for the sick and they'll be raised up. We're here to pray the prayer of faith." The prayer of faith will make the sick person well.

I'd suggest that when we pray the prayer of faith, if the sick person isn't healed the failure is not in scripture, the failure is not in faith, the failure is not necessarily related to sin in a person's life. Because the scripture says the prayer of faith will make the sick person well. It does not say the prayer of faith will always make the sick person well. But that if wellness results it's because the prayer of faith was responsible for it.

Whenever there is healing it is always attributable to faith. Therefore when I call on people, I don't care if the doctor has said it's the final last hours, I always pray for healing. I find it difficult to go to a so-called deathbed and pray a prayer of release. I know there are times maybe we need to do that. But I'm still bound by this scripture. Pray that a person will be well. We're to always do that, to keep the command of the Lord. It's up to him to heal the sick. We're to pray the prayer of faith.

This scripture goes on to say something interesting however. It says if they've committed sins they'll be forgiven. Why this emphasis on sin? So much illness is the result of wrong emotions and attitudes and improper responses to stresses in life. That often has as its base bitterness and ill attitudes toward other people that feaster and ultimately work themselves out in our body. Part of the healing process is to be concerned with more than the body. It's to be concerned with the spirit that lies underneath. Just like when Jesus met the guy who came through the rooftop – Mark 2 – before he ever heals him he says, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." Jesus knows that this man is psychologically and spiritually and emotionally incapacitated and handicapped. He'll never be well if he just has a well body. He needs to be well in the spirit.

I'm not suggesting there's always a connection but sometimes it is there. And it needs to be addressed when it's there. We might ask ourselves if anything going on in our life medically can be traced to a bitterness, to bad thought process, to unforgiveness in our life. I've found that there is a direct relationship to stress in my life and back pain. The back tightens up when I let stress get to me. That's not to say that there's not back pain that isn't related to stress. I'm sure there is. But we need to always look for an underlying cause. Not to put people down or go on a fishing expedition hunting for sin in their life. But to say that there are real connections that exist. We need to deal with them.

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James closes this great passage by reminding us of Elijah. He didn't just pray for God to do something in him but prayed for God to bring about external changes. It dried up and then it rained. That's Elijah's faith.

Those are the references to prayer in James. Two great references, chapter 4 and 5.

There is a reference to prayer in 1 Peter. A number of references. Chapter 3, 4, and 5 and underline verse 7 in each chapter. By the seventh verse he lands on the subject of prayer. In 3:7 "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you to the gracious gift of life so that nothing will hinder your prayers." A person who knows scripture well can immediately take up a discussion with Peter and say, "I have no problem at all with verse 7 as a husband if my wife is living in accordance with verses 1-6. "Wives in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that if any of them do not believe the word they may be won over without talk by the behavior of their wives." We never change our mate by verbally trying to criticize them and correct them. They're won over by example when they see the purity and reverence of your life. "Your beauty should not come from outward adornment such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead it should be that of your inner self the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands like Sarah who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and not give way to fear."

Who couldn't live considerately with a wife like that? But the problem we have with 1-6 and 7 is that there are very few marriages where both people are living in an idolized sense. So you have to end up on the responsibility God calls *you* to do and not the other person to do. You can't say, "When you start acting like verse 7, I'll start acting like verses 1-6!" Or the other way around. In fact, think of scripture as saying neither partner is to be overbearing or domineering lest their prayers be hindered. Our prayers indeed are hindered when we do not have good relationships with one another that are Christ honoring. 7:4 "The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self controlled so that you can pray."

Then a verse that goes closely with that 1 Peter 5:7 "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

When the end of all things is near and life is coming to its concluding moments and things are happening in a hurry we can kind of have an atmosphere in our internal life that is incapable of making decisions. Scripture is reminding us that when the pressure is building and it looks like the end of all things is near, that's the time to really get clear headed and self controlled and pray. God really cares for us. So cast those cares upon him.

Another prayer in 1 Peter 5:10-11 "The God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ after you have suffered a little while will himself restore you and make you strong and firm and steadfast. To him be power for ever and ever, Amen." After you've suffered a little while he'll make you strong and steadfast. In other words the scripture is dealing with this whole process of God building our confidence and saying to us in life, God is going to make you strong as a result of what you're passing through.

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Another scripture that relates closely to that is 1 John 1. First 8-9 then 14-15. “If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Here is a prayer calling for confession. Then 14-15 “This is the assurance we have in approaching God that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And we know that he hears us whatever we ask we know that we have what we ask of him.”

All prayer is conditioned by the will of God. I’m not at all reluctant to pray in my life, thy will be done. Because I believe God has a perfect will for my life and I believe about 99% of that will is already in the Bible. The attitudes I should have the morals I should have, the doctrines I should have – all the things that are really needed. My life is sort of like an iceberg, yours is too. 95% of an iceberg is below the water line. And about 95% of the will of God is always known. We get in this mad quest of What am I going to do? Where am I going to go? The will of God really has everything to do with being and little to do with going and doing. That’s incidental compared to being.

I want to make decisions in life that are in God’s will. Not everything will be pleasant. But we live for God, for His will. That’s what John is reminding us. We know that he hears us whatever we ask. We know that what we’ve asked of him.

I’ve asked God to take my life and do with it what he wants. I’ve asked him to make my character conformable to His nature. He can decide how best he wants to do that. If you’ve lost something or something you’ve been praying for hasn’t worked out that doesn’t mean the will of God hasn’t come to pass in your life. It just means that God is now remolding you and bending you and shaping you in a direction he’d rather have you go.

1 John 5:16 another prayer. “If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that.”

What is John talking about? He’s evidently talking about the sin against the Holy Spirit, which is the blasphemy against the Spirit. All manner of sin, Jesus says, will be forgiven us except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. John says you should pray for everybody that’s committed other kind of sin. I’m not saying you should or shouldn’t pray for the person who’s committed that sin. I think the reason why John is unsure is he like I doesn’t know when a person crosses that line. I’m convinced the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is saying no to the Holy Spirit’s testimony of who the identity of Jesus is. The Holy Spirit is saying, Jesus is God’s Son, our savior. To blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to spur that message which the Holy Spirit is seeking to plant in our hearts. That is the sin on which we will be indicted at the judgment seat of God, that we resisted the testimony of who Jesus was. That’s the one sin that is unforgiveable.

What John saying to us is a positive admonition. If you see somebody in sin, doing wrong, pray for them. This again is kind of a penetrating word to the heart. I think every one of us know people who are committing sin. As a believer do you know people who are committing sin? We know people who as a believer are doing wrong things. Clearly wrong. Do we sit around and criticize them? Scripture says pray for them.

That is admonition for you and for me to pray for people we know to be out of God’s will.

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3 John 2 is a favorite scripture of positive confession people. “Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and all may go well with you even as your soul is getting along well.” That’s sure a good thing to pray! Sure I pray that you’re well. Sure I pray that everything is going well with you. We want that to happen for all people. But that doesn’t mean that God is obligated at all times to provide that. But we fundamentally wish people well. We don’t wish anybody to be sick. Neither does the apostle.

Then Jude 20 “That you dear friend build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.” Is there such a thing as praying but not praying in the Holy Spirit? Does that verse mean we can pray out of the Holy Spirit? In a theological and technical sense no. All praying has to be done through the element and conveyed through the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit. But in this it suggests that there is some praying that can be very mechanical. Let’s let our voices and our face show that the Spirit is in us. Come alive. We need to come alive! Praying in the Spirit means we’re conscious of what we’re doing and we’re excited about what we’re doing. Enthusiasm means in God.

Pray in the Spirit. I think it can mean pray in tongues. It can mean when you pray don’t just go through some motions as if prayer is something mechanical. Think of who we’re coming to. Rest your heart in God. Open up to God. Open your whole life to him. Open your emotions to him. We need to lose some of our inhibitions with God. Let’s not just go through the emotions. Pray in the Spirit. Let the Spirit energize us as we come to God in prayer.

Then fittingly the last verse in the general epistles “To him who is able to keep you from falling...” Who is able to keep me from stumbling and making a mess out of my life? God. And he’s not only going to keep me propped up... he’s going to “present me before his glorious presence without fault.” I’ve been doing my best to cover them up, but I, except in Christ, am not without fault. But on that day he will present me without fault.

You talk about analogy of marriage... Christ is the groom and we’re the bride. What’s he want to do with his bride? Pick some fault with her? He wants to present his bride to the Father without fault. Even if the bride has faults on that day he’s going to say, Because the bride has my name and my wealth and my identity, she is without fault.

Talk about a positive attitude! God really has that toward us. “Without fault and with great joy. To the only God and Savior be glory and majesty and power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord for all ages, now and forevermore Amen!” We can pray to God like that. He wants to present you without fault and with great joy you can praise him. And not only does he want to present you that way but he’s able to keep you from falling.

What a mighty God we serve. A strong God we serve. As we focus on these great words in the New Testament on prayer, we cannot help but see the inner life of prayer and resource in our own personality strengthened and healed. We’re made strong by God himself. We’re made strong by doing something more than simply observing good techniques or good principles of living. God himself in prayer gets inside of us and gives us the power and the energy and resource to live.

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Lord, we thank you and we will praise your holy name. I will sing unto the Lord who is worthy to be praised. I will cry unto the Lord when I am in distress and he will hear me. I will praise the Lord at all times whose praise shall be continually in my mouth. I will say there is no situation too difficult for God to change. I will say there is no weakness in me that he does not have the power to strengthen and make equal to any challenge. For the Lord himself is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? Whom shall I be afraid? Lord, God almighty, let the beautiful qualities of your life be present in our own so that even as you relate to us in such caring and loving and discipling ways we may also do that to one another that we together might be built up in the most holy faith. Thank you for the access you've brought us into your very presence. Thank you for what you are doing for us now in the heavens. Thank you for the Holy Spirit ministering in our hearts. Thank you that you will bring to pass your good and perfect will in our life. We praise you and adore you. In Christ's name. Amen.