

ALISTAIR BEGG

PRAY

Learn to Pray Like an Apostle

BIG

“Helps you feel not just like you *should*
pray, but that you *can*.”

KEVIN DEYOUNG

ALISTAIR BEGG

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The logo features a stylized, light gray bird-like shape above the text. The text "thegoodbook" is in a lowercase, sans-serif font, and "COMPANY" is in a smaller, uppercase, sans-serif font below it.
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To the memory of T. S. Mooney,
who remembered me daily at “the best place.”

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TRUTHFORLIFE[®]
THE BIBLE-TEACHING MINISTRY OF ALISTAIR BEGG

PRAYER IS SPIRITUAL (BUT NOT IMPRACTICAL)

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When I read Paul's prayers, I am always struck by the fact that many of the matters that are the focus of my prayers are absent in his.

Read his prayers in his letter to the Ephesians (or anywhere else in his epistles), and what is striking is the absence of material issues. This absence is especially striking when we consider that Paul was in prison in Rome. But he doesn't pray about his predicament; he doesn't ask that he might be released. That would be legitimate—he's the one who wrote in Philippians 4 v 6...

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything; tell God your needs, and don't forget to thank him for his answers.

(Living Bible paraphrase)

Paul wrote that, and he believed that, and so must we. But we also need to acknowledge with Paul the fact that these

concerns are not the ultimate concerns. All that matters may be brought before God, but what we bring before God is not always what matters most.

SOMETHING BIGGER THAN HEALTH

The believers in Ephesus were in one sense just like us. They had concerns for food and for clothes and for shelter. They would have thought about and talked about and worried about being married or getting married... being parents or wishing they were parents, or wishing some days they weren't parents... employment, paying taxes, wealth, health... but there's no mention of these matters at all in what Paul prays for them.

In fact, praying about health (which, if we had the chance to listen in on the prayers of Western Christians, would likely come in at number one) is rare—almost non-existent—in the Bible. So why are we praying about it so much?

It's because we don't want to die.

We want to live. We've got a sneaking suspicion that what we've got now, this side of death, is actually better than what God has for us then, on the other side of death. So we want to hang on to what we've got. But instead, we need to believe—really believe—that these things are true:

God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly

places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

(Ephesians 2 v 4-7)

You have now been raised with Christ into the heavenly places. You have been made part of a family that will never come to an end. One day, you will live in a new heaven and a new earth. You will see your God face to face and, with a heart no longer burdened and distracted by sin and a body no longer broken and decaying in frailty, you will praise him.

And you and I just want to pray that we'd stay healthy and live long?! All that matters may be brought before God, but what we bring before God is not always what matters most.

When the eyes of our hearts are opened to our future, it changes our lives now—it reorders our priorities and our prayers. We pray less about the practical details of this life, and first and foremost about the spiritual realities of our eternal life. Eternal matters matter more; the concerns of today less. We live out, and we pray based on, the truth that “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1 v 21).

But, time-bound and fallen creature that I naturally am, I often forget the spiritual and eternal element of reality. That's why the things that fill my prayers are so regularly absent from Paul's—and why the things that fill his prayers are so regularly absent from mine. He has his eyes fixed on eternity. His prayers are spiritual. We need to make ours so, too.

NO MORE “BE WITH”

To do that, I want to erase the two words that shut most of our prayers down. Here they are:

“Be with...”

If you were to record my prayers, I have a sad suspicion you’d hear a lot of “be with”: “Dear Lord, I pray you will be with Tom as he goes to work, and be with Mary also, who’s having her wisdom teeth removed on Tuesday, and be with... and be with... and be with... and be with us all. Amen.”

This is unimaginative. It’s limited. It’s certainly not spiritually ambitious, like Paul is. And it is, I think, unnecessary. Jesus said, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28 v 20). He’s promised to be with Tom and with Mary. It’s a bit of a waste to make the sum total of my prayer for them the request that Jesus would do what he already said he’d do, and has already started doing.

Search the Scriptures, and you won’t find a prayer recorded that just asks God to “be with” his people. The prayers of the saints have far more weighty, far more spiritual concerns. Go to Nehemiah. In the opening section of Nehemiah, word comes to him in exile, working as the cupbearer of the Persian king, telling him that the walls of God’s city, Jerusalem, are broken down and the gates are burned with fire. It is a complete fiasco up there. Nehemiah is brokenhearted by this; he decides that he will seek to do something about it. But, of course, he knows the truths we saw in the previous chapter of this book, and so...

As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said..."
(Nehemiah 1 v 4-5)

You can read his prayer, right there in Nehemiah 1:

O LORD God, please be with all the people in Jerusalem...

No, he doesn't say that!

He says (and I'm paraphrasing), *O God, you great and awesome and magnificent God, who rules over the universe. We, your people, bow before you and confess our sins and our shortcomings before you.*

Can you see what he's doing? He's getting spiritual before he gets practical. He knows that the issue of the walls in Jerusalem is a metaphor for the real spiritual condition of the people. The reason that the wall is collapsed and broken down is because of the spiritual needs of their hearts. So Nehemiah prays first about what matters most: *Lord, I must confess our sins. Lord, I must acknowledge our complete dependence upon you. Lord, let us turn our gaze to the things that really matter, because we have completely lost sight of what's going on.*

Look at the prayers of Daniel, and he's the same. In Daniel 9, in the middle of the oppression of God's people, as chaos surrounds the people of God, he doesn't pray about practicalities. He prays about the grandeur and glory of God and his kingdom, and the fact that he is sovereign. It's immense. I'm humbled by him; I'm

humbled by Nehemiah; I'm humbled by Paul. How small, how narrow-minded are my prayers. How "be with" are my prayers.

In my experience, those of us who are parents are particularly at risk of this kind of attitude when it comes to our children. If you have kids, here's one way to diagnose whether your prayers are over-practical and under-spiritual. What do you pray for your kids, when you pray for them (if you do)? Would our prayers for our children reveal that we understand that their spiritual condition matters more than their financial or relational or vocational well-being? Would our prayers reflect the truth that their position in Christ matters infinitely more than their position in school or college or the office or society?

All that matters may be brought before God, but we must always bring before God those things that matter most.

THE HUB

Don't take my word for this, though. Take Jesus' word.

In that famous passage in Matthew 6, Jesus talks to his followers about legitimate practical concerns—their food, their clothes, their lives. And he doesn't rebuke them for caring about those things. But he does say, *Let's think about this. Have you ever seen birds putting up a factory to make stuff? Why not? Because our Father feeds them. And have you ever seen the flowers sewing their clothes or heading down to the mall to make sure they have the right kit? Why not? Because no matter what clothes we manage to get, we'll never match the amazing natural beauty of God's creative handiwork. So, Jesus says, let me tell you what to do:*

Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness... (v 33)

That's prioritizing spiritual things.

... and all these things will be added to you.

In other words, to paraphrase Jesus, he says, *If you take care of my things, I'll take care of your things.*

The hub—the center of our lives and our actions—is always spiritual. Think about a bicycle wheel—the hub there is the key to all the spokes. If that hub is weak or ill-fitting, so that the spokes are buckling, loose, or unattached, then the spokes will be ineffective and insufficient in enabling the wheel to take you in the direction you need to go. The hub is crucial. And when it comes to each of us, our hub is spiritual. The reason that Paul bows his knees before the Father who is in heaven and prays in this way is because he wants to show the Ephesians that this is what really matters. And so spiritual matters are what the focus of our prayers—not the entirety, but the focus—must be.

SPIRITUAL CHANGE IS PRACTICALLY SEEN

When the spiritual hub of my life is solid, then the practical spokes will be strong. We tend to live as if, and pray as if, what we most need is help with this practical issue or that specific life problem. And we all have particular situations that we need divine help with and divine transformation in. But it's as we grow in our appreciation of the gospel that our lives will change to reflect that gospel.

The Ephesian Christians knew that because they'd experienced that. Ephesus was a city that was prosperous as a result of its ability to trade, and prominent on account of being the site of the great temple of Artemis or Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. That temple both drove pagan, magical worship and underpinned the local economy.

It was in that setting that Paul turned up and proclaimed the lordship of Jesus. Day after day, month after month, he “spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God ... so that all the residents of Asia [modern-day Turkey] heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19 v 8, 10).

Ephesus was a spiritual battleground. New believers were leaving a life dominated by the occult and by the power of spiritual forces (v 11-17). And that spiritual transformation led to practical change:

Many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. (v 18-20)

It must have been a quite magnificent bonfire as these Christians brought their books of magic together and burned them in a public forum. Don't miss the value of this reading material—fifty thousand pieces of silver.

That is a substantial amount of money. Imagine the conversations:

“What has happened to these people? Why are they burning all their books?”

“Well, they have a completely different view of the world.”

“You mean they don’t believe in spiritual stuff anymore?”

“Oh no, they do. But they’ve started to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is alive beyond his death, and that he forgives sins and that he is all-powerful over every sphere.”

“Well, that sounds crazy. What idiots, to burn their books. They might at least have sold them.”

The point is this: your hub—your spiritual belief system and view of God—drives your practical actions. And so when Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, he didn’t say, *You need someone to sort out the political and civic structures of your city.* He didn’t say, *You need to get some laws on the statute books that ban the riots you’ve been subjected to and the occult worship your city has been oppressed by.* No—Paul says to them, and us, that what we really need to know is the truth of the gospel. What we really need to know, or rather, who we really need to know, is Jesus. We need to know with assurance all that is ours in the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to know what is true of us now and we need to be aware of what will be true of us on the day when all things are wrapped up. Paul says, *I’m praying for that. You’ll stand firm if you know truth.*

We’re the same. What you and I need more than anything else is to be made experientially aware of the truth

and reality of the Lord Jesus Christ—we need to know “the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe” (Ephesians 1 v 19). Too often, our Jesus is too weak. We’ve got a view of Jesus that somehow puts him fighting for a place in the pantheon of gods—fighting for his position in the great story of spiritual history. We need to understand that Jesus wears a crown that infinitely outshines and eternally outlasts any and every other power—that he is, as the old hymn “Crown Him With Many Crowns” puts it, the Lord...

*Whose power a scepter sways
From pole to pole, that wars may cease,
And all be prayer and praise.*

And we need to understand that he is...

*... the Lord of years,
The Potentate of time.
Creator of the rolling spheres,
Ineffably sublime. (Matthew Bridges)*

If we know this Jesus, we will each have a firm hub in the center of our lives, and we will each pray.

THOSE THINGS THAT MATTER MOST

So, when you start to pray, what’s the concern that fills your vision?

You are facing a huge issue in your job? You need God’s help with that, and so what you most need to know is the gospel. You need to know how to fix your marriage? You

need God's help with that, and so what you most need to know is the gospel. You are so worried about something one of your kids is into? You need God's help with that, and so what you most need to know is the gospel. You are facing serious health problems? You need God's help with that, and so what you most need to know is the gospel.

We will see as we continue to enjoy Paul's prayers for the Ephesians how gospel truth makes a difference, in prayer and practicalities. But first, we need to start to pray spiritually. We need to start there—and then, as we move on to our practical concerns in our prayers, we need to let the way we pray about them flow from the spiritual truths we've prayed about. Let's not allow the focus of Paul's prayers to be absent from ours. All that matters may be brought before God, but we must always bring before God those things that matter most.

Father, thank you for not sparing your own Son and giving him up for us all. I know that this is what really matters. Thank you too that, along with him, you freely give us all things. For the many ways in which you provide for the practical concerns of my life, I praise you; and I ask that those practicalities would never become my sole or even primary focus. Help me to seek the help of the Holy Spirit in dealing with different and difficult matters, and most of all to remember what matters most. In Jesus' name. Amen.