

Prayer and Walking Worthy

Hebrews 11

Elder Scott Hess and Pastor Tom Becker

Prayer, by Scott Hess:

Morning church family. If you don't know me. My name is Scott Hess, and this morning, I want to take a moment just to pause and reflect on prayer, focusing specifically on the Lord's Prayer. So many of us, probably at different times, have questions or even objections about prayer. One might be, "If God already knows everything, He knows our needs before we ask, why should we even pray? It seems unnecessary or even redundant to bring a request to God if He's already aware of them." And the second struggle is that, unlike conversations with other people, we don't often get a direct response from God. When we talk with family or friends, we hear their voices, we see their reactions. We know they're listening and responding with prayer. We might wonder if we're talking with God, "Why does it feel like I'm talking into the air?" We might not get direct answers to those questions. Who can know the mind of God? But I think shifting our perspective when it comes to prayer can help make these questions feel less weighty. Think about prayer like this: It's expressing our desire to connect with God and what He's doing in the world. He is always at work and we want to see Him at work and join with Him. So with that in mind, let's use the example of prayer that Jesus gave us, and it's called the *Lord's Prayer*, and you can find in the book of Matthew. It goes like this:

"Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

So through prayer we are asking God to show us His activity and to draw us into His mission. For instance, we pray, "forgive us as we forgive". What we're saying is that God is a radically forgiving God. We're asking God to make us forgivers like Him. In the prayer, we ask for "daily bread", which is a way of saying, "meet our needs as you see them with exactly what we need". When our needs are met we recognize that God is the one who met them. In praying we're not simply presenting a wish list, but we're shaping our minds and hearts to see God's hands in both the everyday and the extraordinary. Prayer also addresses our longing for significance and purpose. From the very first words, "Our Father", we're reminded that God doesn't treat us as insignificant or unworthy, like pawns on a chessboard or worthless slaves. He welcomes us as beloved sons and daughters. And, "in heaven" doesn't mean God is distant from us. Instead, it's a reminder that we can't reach heaven on our own. We can't build anything to get there. We're not good enough, we're not powerful enough. God has made a way for us to speak with Him, and He listens to us as His children. In Isaiah 57:15, God describes Himself as living in a high and holy place. Yet He stoops down to revive the spirits of the lowly. When we pray, we connect with God Himself. He delights in hearing our prayers, not because he needs them, but because He loves us. Even if some of us haven't experienced love from early parents, God is a good Father. When we feel insignificant, prayer connects us to our loving Father. When we feel purposeless or adrift, God, through our prayer, opens our eyes to His presence, and joins Him in what He's doing. So with that being said, pray. Tell God your hopes and fears. Ask for wisdom. Talk to your loving Father. If you have no words to pray, pray the Lord's Prayer. It is, after all, the prayer the Church has used since the beginning when the disciples asked, "Teach us to pray."

Sermon, by Tom Becker:

Opening:

As we go to the Word together, I had actually prepared this week for communion, and I think we're going to save that sermon for the 22nd when we're together again. And what I'd like to share with you is more of a devotional nature, something that I believe the Lord gave me this week. I hope it will be an encouragement for all of us.

One of the incredible privileges that I have in ministry is to be welcomed into some of the most challenging times of people's lives and to journey with them a little bit along the way through some dark valleys. This last week, in going to pray with someone, I asked the Lord what He would have me to share with them, and He took me to Hebrews chapter 11. Now, this is the very famous chapter of faith, but in reading the first few verses, there were a couple of things that struck me that I know that I am going to carry with me in times of challenge and times of questioning in my own life. So this is how Hebrews chapter 11 starts off (we'll just be reading the first few verses):

“Now faith is confidence and what we hope for and assurance about what we do not yet see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what is visible. By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. By faith Enoch was taken from this life so that he did not experience death. He could not be found because God had taken him away. For before he was taken he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

Believing Without Seeing:

So a couple of things that I just really hadn't considered before as the Lord brought this passage to mind. And the first one is, of course, it starts in talking about faith and that essential understanding, that faith is believing God for something that we cannot see. It's not tangible, we can't hold it, we can't touch it, we can't prove it by some formula. But we trust God that what He says is true. And it's so amazing that the very first example that the author shares, the example of faith, is in God's creative work. He uses the same word there, things that are not seen. And so the foundation of our faith is our understanding and our bedrock trust in God as the one who is the Almighty Creator who is capable of bringing into existence everything that we see around us, out of what is unseen. And if we can trust God for the miraculous power to bring everything out of what is unseen, then we can trust God with the other things that we don't see now, and can understand that He is more than able to follow through on His promises and to accomplish His purposes, even if we can't see how that is going to be. That is what the ancients were commended for.

Two Testimonies of Faith with Different Deaths:

And the second thing that struck me was two of the ancients, two of these testimonies of faith, that of Abel and then that of Enoch. Perhaps, as we were reading through, you saw a couple of things that Abel and Enoch have in common. They were praised for their faith. Now this was the time when they did not have the written revelation of the Word of God, but they had a relationship with God. That relationship was based on faith, and they were praised for their faith. In fact, we are told, and this is the second thing, that both of them pleased God. Abel pleased God with his sacrifice, and in fact, the sacrifice that he brought to God showed demonstrated the reality of his righteousness. What was particularly pleasing about Abel's sacrifice is that it followed according to the pattern that God had given. In the garden when Adam and Eve realized that they were naked, when they had sinned and their guilt was exposed, they tried to provide a covering for themselves out of the plants of the garden. They tried to do some kind of work to cover up their guilt. God said, no, that's not the way that guilt was covered up, and He provided them with a skin. Now where did that skin come from? That skin came from a sacrifice. Only a sacrifice can cover over sin. God had provided that pattern. Abel had observed that pattern, and so he brought a sacrifice to God according to the pattern that God had provided. Cain [Abel], on the other hand, tried to bring the fruit of his labors as something that would be acceptable to God. God looked on Abel's faith in bringing this sacrifice and was pleased with it, and that was a demonstration of Abel's righteousness. Enoch then pleased God because he walked with God faithfully. That's actually the words that come out of the book of Genesis, describing how Enoch was then, as it's called, translated- how he actually transferred from life on this earth to eternal life without undergoing death.

So both of these men were praised for their faith, and both of these men in particular pleased God- Abel, by bringing a sacrifice that demonstrated righteousness, and Enoch, by walking with God faithfully. But there's a big difference in these two men and that difference is the way that they passed. Abel died a horrible death. Abel's blood was spilled out and soaked into the ground and cried out to God of the injustice of murder that he suffered at the hand of his brother. It was a terrible way to die. Enoch, on the other hand, did not experience the pain or the horrors of physical death. His life was so pleasing to the Lord that the Lord brought him directly to Himself. There're only two other examples of that: Elijah, who was brought up to the Lord in a chariot of fire, and then Jesus, who did die and was raised from the dead, but then in His ascension was translated directly into the presence of the Lord.

Why? Why does one suffer injustice, pain, and murder, and another experience a glory that is almost exclusive? We are not given an answer here. We do know that both of them had faith. We do know that both of them pleased God. And we are not given a reason why one person of faith would undergo such horrible circumstances, and another person of faith would experience such glory. There is no explanation, but this is what faith is about. Faith is about believing when we cannot see, about trusting when we cannot understand. And the thing that we do know is that they received the reward for their faithfulness.

Acceptable:

The author says that Abel's testimony still speaks to us to this day. So what are some things that this testimony of faith can speak to us this morning? One of them, of course, is about the matter of

salvation. To this day, we still want to do something; we still want to provide a demonstration of our goodness, of our faithfulness, of our righteousness. This is called self-righteousness. This is absolutely contrary to the gospel. And yet we still strive, and strive, and strive to do something to please God. The thing that pleases God is faith and is trusting in the sacrifice that He has provided. Everyone who is saved is saved because they believe in Jesus Christ, and the fact that Jesus Christ died as the sacrifice for our sins, and that only His offering is acceptable. And so if we are going to walk in the pattern of Abel and Enoch, and the other saints of old, then first and foremost we must place our faith in Jesus Christ as the One who can take away our sins and give us salvation, make us a child of God, and open the door to eternal life and to glory for us. It will never do, either before the moment that we are given new life in Christ, or after the moment that we are given new life in Christ, it will never do for us to try and bring the labors of our hands as something that we think will make us more acceptable to God. Jesus is the One who is acceptable, and in Christ we become acceptable to God.

A Walk That is Worthy:

The other thing that these men testify to us about then, is the kind of walk that is pleasing to the Lord. Some of you might remember that the Apostle Paul in the book of Colossians, chapter one, prays that we would walk in a manner that is worthy of the Lord and be pleasing to Him in every way. Well, walking in the Lord and being pleasing to Him is exactly what's described in Enoch's life. And we know that that comes about by faith. And so as we are driving through this life, we are called to a testimony of faith. We are called to walk in faith, we are called to serve in faith. We are called for everything that we do to be an outflow of what God has accomplished in our lives.

Now, there are some specific ways that this passage actually opens up for us about walking in faith. There are some helps along the way that are described for here. One of them is when, as Abel, we experience injustice or suffering in this life. It's not only the example of Abel and Enoch, in which we see some who experience blessing and glory, and then others like Abel, who experienced injustice and suffering. The end of Hebrews chapter 11 describes for us many, many more similar examples. Here's what the author says starting in verse 32,

“What more shall I say? I did not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who, through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength, and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even greater resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning. They were sawn, and two they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goat skins, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised since God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

Do you see the contrast in those stories? There's no guarantee for a person of faith that you're going to be on the one side where there was victory after victory, or on the other side where there was seemingly endless suffering. In fact, if there is any guarantee, it is the fact that Jesus said to his disciples and says to us, "in this world you will have trouble, but take heart. I have overcome the world." Those are the eyes of faith that hear Jesus' words, that recognize that probably we're going to be along the lines of Abel, experiencing injustice, suffering, and pain in this world. But Jesus has gone before us, walking that way of suffering, and has opened for us the way of glory. We're about to see that when we read together in Hebrews chapter 12.

There is so much suffering in this world. There is sickness. There is a loss of our capabilities as we age. There is injustice that we see in the world around us and that some of us may experience in this life. There is loss, there is grief. If we see anything in this chapter, we understand that that is a normal part of the walk of faith. And the way that faith responds, is to say, "I don't know why I can't understand, but I trust You for what I cannot see, oh Lord." That's the response of faith.

Overcoming Temptation:

Another testimony about our walk in these paths, in these verses, is overcoming temptation. And so now I want to read together the first few verses of Hebrews 12,

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses," (that is the testimony of faith of the ancients that filled Hebrews chapter 11, that's the cloud of witness), "since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood."

The author of Hebrews is calling us to look at the testimony of faith of those men and women, and based on their perseverance and their fortitude, and their following hard after what they believed in, that we follow hard after Christ, and in so doing overcome temptation. Overcoming temptation is a matter of faith. It is a matter of believing that what God has said is better than what my heart, or what my flesh, or what my environment or culture is telling me is good. This temptation is as old as Adam and Eve. What did the serpent say to Eve? "If you take of that fruit and eat it now, you will receive your heart's desire." And instead of following God's way and receiving the reward and the blessing that God had for Adam and Eve, in the end they chose instant gratification. That is what temptation is. That is what the world and the flesh and the devil constantly say to us, "If you grab this thing now, you will receive the desire of your heart." Faith says, "No, I believe that God's way is better. I believe that the reward that He has for me, that I cannot yet see, is better than the empty promises that this world is offering me today." And so it is faith that enables us to overcome temptation, not shortcuts, not grabbing what we can see, but following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning of shame.

Assurance:

There's a third thing, a third way that these verses help us to understand how the life of faith is pleasing to God. It comes from the very first verse of Hebrews 11, "Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not yet see." The hardest journey that every one of us will travel is the journey of decline and of death. And unfortunately, we see it around us all the time. One of the things that we talked about is the blessed hope, the unshakable confidence that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ has eternal life, and assurance of being in the presence of Jesus the moment that we pass away, going into God's presence, and so, experiencing ever increasing joy at His right hand. That's not just something that, "well, maybe if I'm good enough, it's going to happen I suppose". That is something that we can be absolutely assured of because our confidence is not in ourselves or anything that we did, or anything that we can conjure up, or any future that we can make for ourselves. Our confidence is in the God who is powerful enough to create everything around us out of what is not seen, the God who is faithful to his promises. And so when we do not understand and cannot see how things could ever work out, He is the one who carry these men and women of faith through their journey, and the one who carries us through our journey. That's the same God who will bring us to Himself in glory. We can be absolutely assured of His promises. I'm going to skip to another passage to talk a little bit more about this, and that is in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, the very famous passage on resurrection. And it ties in with our faith. 1 Corinthians 15:17 [through verse 20],

"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits among those who have fallen asleep."

We already have something that we can see. It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fact that He has gone before us through the journey of painful suffering and death. And then been risen from, raised from the dead, is an assurance to us who are in Christ that we can trust Him through that same journey, in fact, that He walks with us through that painful journey, bringing us to a glorious end, and that is eternity with Him.

Faith is being assured of that thing that I don't yet see, but that I am absolutely persuaded will be accomplished in Christ. This is how the Apostle Paul concludes, 1 Corinthians 15 and that journey of faith,

"I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." (That's kind of like Enoch and Elijah.) "For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true. Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, o death is your victory? Where, o death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Conclusion:

So my wish for you this morning, this weekend, whether you're watching at home or somewhere else, is that you will be encouraged in a journey of faith. There is some times on this journey that we are discouraged. We can't see God. We can't prove with a formula the reality of all of these things that we believe. We can't see Him, but we do believe on Him. We can't produce salvation. We can't demonstrate the reality of salvation on pen and paper. But we can receive salvation by faith because it has been promised to us in Jesus Christ. We can't see the reward, but we know that it is promised, and the one who promised is faithful. And so we can persevere through the present sufferings because of our assurance of what is to come. We can't understand why things happen the way that they happen sometimes. But we can trust God because He always accomplishes His good purposes. Let's just look at that incredible example of Abel and Enoch, two men of faith, two men who please God, two men who had very different experiences, but received the same reward because of their faith in Jesus Christ. And may that reward be ours, brothers and sisters, as we believe in Jesus Christ.

Let's pray together, "Heavenly Father, thank You so much for these examples. And thank You so much for the example of Jesus Christ. Sometimes I think that we feel like these commands are perhaps theoretical. I mean, You are the sovereign and the holy God of all of the universe. But the things that You command us are things that Jesus, God made flesh, experienced. Jesus, You walked this journey before us. You led the way. You understand the road of suffering in the flesh. You understand grief. You understand separation and loss. You understand disappointment. You understand dread even as You dreaded the cross, praying in the garden, pleading that it would be taken away from You, but by faith, accepting that cup and saying, "nevertheless, Lord, not My will, but Yours, be done." You experienced injustice, pain, torture, and death for our sake. So, thank You that You do not call us to something that You were not willing to undergo first on our behalf. Lord, I pray that whatever circumstances my brothers and sisters find themselves in this weekend or this coming week, or this month or whatever, we don't even know what we're going to face this year, I pray that in all those circumstances, You would enable us to trust in You without seeing, without understanding, without knowing, to be able to believe You, to carry us through, to walk with us, through the journey, to accomplish in us Your purposes, to form us and transform us into the image of the beautiful character of Jesus Christ. Lord, to bring Yourself glory in us and through us in whatever circumstances You call us to. We pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen."