

Finally, sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.

I appeal to you, sisters, by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by His Spirit, that you take into consideration all that you have learned while we were among you.

And now, concerning life. Be prepared. It is hard.

The psalmist had only to lift his eyes to see the hills and feel overwhelmed. He lived in a culture of contempt and scorn. The hatred of the world was so intense that it threatened to sweep over God's people like the raging waters of a flood. Affliction was a part of life. Even as a youth.

Fast forward to the world of the Apostles and the little church in Ephesus. Their faith was formed in a city filled with sorcerers, evil spirits, magic arts and false gods. The writer of Acts described the coming of the gospel as causing "no small disturbance" to the lives of the people there. The believers in Thessalonica suffered from their own countrymen...They were driven out, opposed, and hindered from ministry. Ultimately, it appears that some gave their very lives for the gospel.

Jesus Himself, in His "last will and testament" prayer from John 17, describes His friends as being *hated* by the world. Therefore, when you pray, be prepared and be realistic.

Life, this side of heaven, is hard. The headlines from this morning's Observer are instructive:

- "Teen dies when friend loses control of car."
- "Wreck closes I-40."
- "New suit filed for S.C. economist's fraud."
- "Oil spill growing in Gulf of Mexico."
- "Trial set to begin in NJ schoolyard triple slaying."

Circumstances are painful. Relationships are strained. Money is tight. Sleep is rare.

And often, what's happening *inside* of me is much more challenging than what you see on the outside. *"I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched woman that I am!...i myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin..."* (Romans 7:23-25)

How long will the battle rage? Against my sin and the unholy bent of my heart and mind? "The worst thing we ever face is the sin inside ourselves. We must drive ourselves relentless to depend on Christ...there will *always* be a conflict."¹

Concerning life. I implore you to accept the reality that life is hard.

And now, concerning God. Be careful with your theology. Our Westminster Catechism urges: "We are to pray with an awful apprehension of the majesty of God." (Q/A 185) You have studied for yourselves the character and nature of God.

¹ Mike Ross, Senior staff meeting, 4/26/10

The Deliverer, the Keeper, the Helper, the Preserver, the Authority, the faithful one, the restorer, the Father, the Builder, the Father of Glory, the Head over all things, the One who is able to do far more than all that we ask or think, the One who makes you increase and abound in love for one another.

He is the establisher of your hearts blameless in holiness. He makes you worthy of His calling and fulfills His every resolve for good in your lives. He loves you and has given you eternal comfort, having established you in every good work and word. He is the Lord of peace.

Good prayers are anchored in right thinking about God. When you pray, for your safety as you travel, for the health of a friend, for the growth of your business, for the emptiness of your soul... do not pray as those who have no knowledge of Him.

Wrong thoughts about God amount to idolatry. Idolatry makes a pathway to a disappointing prayer life. Requests made to a "god" we have fabricated with our minds do not have the hoped for effect. Rather, they produce despair, discouragement & defeat.

I prayed one time for my son's safety as he travelled in Rome. I believed that God was his Keeper and Preserver and Protector. When he was mugged on his way home late one night, beaten up and humiliated...I wondered what had gone wrong.

Idolatry threatened that prayer. I fashioned in my mind a God who would not let harm come to my son. I forgot that the "keeping" and "preserving" of Milas' life was much bigger in the mind and heart of God than his physical safety in that moment.

The words of Jesus, John 17, should have instructed my thoughts about God. *"Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, ...while I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost..."* My prayers for Milas while in Rome should have been rooted in *this* theology.

God, the keeper and preserver of Milas' life, will guard him and not lose him. For eternity. I urge you, therefore, sisters, to exercise your theology when you pray.

The character and nature of God is not a mystery. What is true about God relative to your safety? To your friend's health? To the growth of your business? To the emptiness of your soul?

Concerning Life. Be prepared. Be realistic.

Concerning God. Be careful with your theology.

And now, concerning prayer.

I urge you, sisters, as we come to the end of our study on prayer, to carefully consider the words of Christ from John 15. *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser...abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me...if you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you..."*

Concerning prayer, be the branch.

All of these months we have studied the Word of God and the prayers divinely inspired and recorded for us by the Holy Spirit. These are the words of Christ. They reveal His heart and mind. They expose His redemptive purpose for His creation. Abide in Him. Abide in them.

Be the branch. AND THEN ASK.

With the psalmist, pray for peace within our walls. For mercy in the midst of contempt. For help in the name of the Lord. For good to those who are good. For reaping with shouts of joy despite tearful sowing. For righteousness to triumph over evil. For hope.

And with the apostle...Pray for revelation. For enlightened eyes to the riches of our inheritance. Pray for the power of the Spirit in our inner being. To know the love of Christ. Pray for love to abound. And for discernment. For purity. And spiritual wisdom .

This is the branch. Hanging on to the vine. This is the branch *abiding*...

This is not to say that spontaneous, informal prayers are ungodly. There is something very intimate about what Tom Henry used to call "constant, conscious communion." But, it is to say that a godward prayer life is never really free from constraints. When we allow ourselves complete freedom from the Vine, when we refuse to abide in His words --- thinking to compose liberally, we increase the risk that we become vain, self-centered, and earthbound pray-ers...pride and self-righteous eloquence serving to cut us off from the vine.

From its nourishment. From its strength. From its purpose. *"...if you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you..."*

The words of the vine abiding in the prayers of the branch. Quietly listening to the gracious assurances of God about life and ministry. Settling the soul for resting in the sufficiency of God. Inclining the heart and mind to the will and plans of the Father.

Concerning prayer, be the branch. The branch does not determine a purpose of its own. The efforts of the branch coincide with the ultimate purpose of the vine. *Abiding*. The branch does not determine its own needs and demand that they be met. The vine determines the needs of its branches and supplies those needs as it will. *Abiding*.

John MacArthur has said: "Prayer is not asking God to do my will. It is bringing myself [the branch] into conformity with His will [the Vine]. It is asking Him to do His will and to give me the grace to enjoy it."

This is not to say, again, that particular, specific prayers are evil. The Savior Himself, in the shadow of the cross, asked God for another way. *"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me."* (Luke 22:42) But the branch never lost sight of the vine. He finished that prayer: *"Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done."*

Concerning prayer, I urge you, sisters, to be the branch. Hang on. Abide. Confident in the vine from which you draw life. Content to serve its purpose.

Concerning life. Be realistic. Be prepared.

Concerning God, be careful with your theology.

Concerning prayer, be the branch.

And now, concerning hope. Be diligent. Be watchful.

It has come to our attention that, in our absence, you *have* been praying faithfully with reality in mind and theology underpinning your prayers. You *are* using the Scripture as your guide. And yet you are disappointed. I am not surprised.

The psalmist prayed for peace... What do you suppose he hoped for exactly? He prayed for mercy. How did he know when mercy came? He prayed for good. What was he looking for? What does it mean to have “enlightened eyes”? And how does that help when your marriage is crumbling? What exactly is the power of the Spirit in your inner being? How does knowing the love of Christ affect the conflict that rages in my soul...the sin inside myself? What difference does spiritual wisdom make in the absence of rain? Or shelter? Or health? Or bread?

Concerning life. Be realistic.

Concerning God. Be careful.

Concerning prayer. Be conscious.

Concerning hope. Be watchful.

I want you to remember, sisters, these familiar words from Isaiah: “*My thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are my ways, your ways.*” (Isa. 55:8) While He is faithful to hear and answer the prayers of His people, His ways are not our ways. We must stop being surprised. Instead, we must be watchful. Diligent.

Keeping in mind the character and nature of God, it is necessary, often, to *look for* His answer to our prayers. Nicole Nordeman, in her song titled “Gratitude”, describes this challenge...

“Send some rain, would you send some rain?
Cause the earth is dry and needs to drink again
And the sun is high and we are sinking in the shade
Would you send a cloud, thunder long and loud?
Let the sky grow black and send some mercy down
Surely you can see that we are thirsty and afraid
But maybe not, not today.
Maybe you’ll provide in other ways
And if that’s the case
We’ll give thanks to you with gratitude
For lessons learned in how to thirst for you
How to bless the very sun that warms our face
If you never send us rain...”

His thoughts are not my thoughts. His ways are not my ways. But that does not undermine my hope.

Concerning hope. Be diligent. Be watchful. Looking for rain? Perhaps the need is not rain...but knowing how to thirst for the Rain Maker. Looking for shelter? Perhaps, as Nordeman suggests, what we *really* need is

“a lesson learned to hunger after you
That a starry sky offers a better view
If no roof is overhead...”

Hope is rooted in the reality of the nature and character of God. If the answer is not obvious, perhaps what is needed is a new perspective. “Expectant prayers offer God the largest possible stage on which to display His faithfulness.”²

Concerning hope...be watchful. Sometimes the answer to prayer might surprise it's pray-er. Look. Wonder. Think. Study. Watch. His ways are not your ways.

And while you wait and watch, remember this. Prayer is not so much a means to some other end as a wonderful, mysterious end in itself. And so we encourage you to anticipate subtle changes in your hostile heart as it is softened and “*inclined to Him*”. As you pray...and watch...and wait...Yours will become a soul intent on knowing and serving Christ. The words of the prophet Jeremiah will become a powerful reality: “*You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you.*” (Jeremiah 29:13)

God is never doing nothing. Concerning hope. Be watchful. Our brother, Paul the apostle, wrote to our friends the Corinthians: “*And we all...are being transformed into the same image [the glory of the Lord], from one degree of glory to another.*” Faithful prayer, sisters, does its work in you. If you never see the rain. If you never experience what you expected through your prayer. If the heavens seems to reverberate silence for days on end. You are being transformed into the likeness of Christ. Walking close to God. Growing in holiness.

I implore you, sisters, to be steadfast. Concerning hope. Be diligent. Be watchful. Never give up. You are *becoming something*. You are *being transformed*. And this is life.

Concerning life. Be prepared.

Concerning God. Be careful.

Concerning prayer. Be the branch.

Concerning hope. Be watchful.

Finally, sisters, be assured that God is both able and willing to equip us fully for that to which we are called. Prayer such as we have studied “turns our sphere of influence into a magnificent gallery for displaying God’s glory.”³ And that, friends, is our “chief end”. It is enough. Don’t you think?

² Ruvolo, Before the Throne

³ Ruvolo, Before the Throne, p. 64

This is my prayer for you: *“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, The great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”* (Hebrews 13:20,21)