

Pray more Intentionally...You'll feel better
Phil 4:4-7

Sometime around the beginning of this past July, as we were all in the midst of the flood recovery efforts, I happened to read the following letter submitted to the Calgary Sun's editorial page...

SAVE YOUR PRAYERS: re: Call for Prayer, Letters to the Editor, June 29. As one of thousands of displaced people who have been affected by the flood, and with all due respect to the Rev. Friesen, I wonder if it would be possible to request that all the "faith" groups in all the towns get off their collective lead-lined butts and actually do something to help disaster refugees, instead of praying. We might actually get things done faster that way, just saying.

I won't bother telling you who wrote it, but I will tell you that it's an excellent example of how prayer is typically perceived.

That prayer is something passive, that it's the opposite of taking action or doing something practical.

That someone who prays in the face of disaster or need is one of those people who are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.

Well friends, nothing could be farther from the truth and its obvious that this poor fellow who wrote this letter has no idea what prayer is all about, what it can accomplish and what actually goes into it.

Now, that's not to say that He hasn't prayed once or twice in his own life.

You see when it comes to prayer, most people – if not all... have prayed at least once.

In fact if we're talking about "religious things" that people can do, it's a safe bet to assume that more people pray... than read the bible.

More people pray... than go to church, more people pray... than do anything else.

And friends, that's because all of us - at some point or another – come to realize that we are not in control of what's going on around us, so we look to some other source of help in our efforts to cope with our lack of control.

We ask for help from the universe a higher power, fate, God...

Something or someone who we may not know, but we just hope is out there and can hear us and help us.

Friends - this kind of prayer is what I like to call a "Hail Mary" and I don't literally mean the Catholic prayer "Hail Mary mother of God etc..."

I mean the Hail Mary football strategy, where when all else fails you just throw the ball downfield and hope someone on your team catches it.

Like when you're stuck in traffic on the Deerfoot and you're late for an important meeting – you throw up your hands in

frustration and say "Oh God - help me!" in hopes that the traffic miraculously starts moving again.

Or perhaps you've just received some devastating medical news that you or a loved one has cancer and you just shake your head and murmur "God help us, please don't let this happen" in hopes that miraculously this isn't true.

Now interestingly enough if you look this up the term "Hail Mary" on Wikipedia – it says "it is a move of desperation, a last ditch effort, with little hope of success."

So when I say most people have prayed, I believe that most people have prayed this kind of prayer.

When we encounter difficulties, trouble, disaster... we throw up a Hail Mary prayer. It's almost like a wish which we hope will be granted so our problem or challenge will be overcome, but deep down we're not really sure if it's possible, but this our last and only hope – so we send off a prayer.

So what this means is that we're actually "praying" way more than what we thought we were, but it's kind of haphazard, hit and miss and not very effective...

So the goal of this series is to learn what the Holy Spirit wants to teach us from the scripture about prayer, to help move us from using prayer in a "Hail Mary" fashion to using prayer intentionally, specifically and consistently.

So that we become what's known in Christian circles as "prayer warriors" – people whose prayers revolutionize the lives of others for Christ's Kingdom purposes – just like it says in James 5:16 *"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."*

So we start to move beyond "Hail Marys' " by recognizing the reality in which we are praying.

If we look at that scripture we read this morning, from Philippians chapter 4, we see that it reveals the context – and awareness of this context will help us pray more intentionally.

So verse 4 says "Rejoice in the Lord Always..." That's the context to intentional prayer. It's a backdrop, a mindset - which prompts us to proactively turn to prayer for anything, as our **first** resort, and to do so with confidence.

Now, the apostle Paul – who wrote the letter of Phillipians – instructs us to "rejoice" - a word which we may hear often in the bible and our songs - but really what does it mean?

Friends - to rejoice is to express our joy.

So what do you normally do when you express joy? Do you have a happy dance? Do you shout? Do you say "Yes!"

Hopefully you know because Paul encourages us here to do it. Express your joy! Express your joy that you belong to God in Christ, always!

But that might seem a bit inauthentic to us. What joy – right? What if we're going through a divorce, lost our job, got flooded out, etc...

Friends, let me introduce you to the OT prophet Habakkuk. He understood this dilemma of praising God, of rejoicing for what God has done when life turns out like this.

Habakkuk was a faithful follower of God, a devout Israelite, one of God's chosen - yet he saw the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

He wrestled with how God could let this happen, (In fact his name means to wrestle) and it was difficult for him to be joyful despite being one of God's chosen people.

But in his wrestling with the issue – he prayed about it and it's written down for us to learn from, and this is what he says.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

After talking to God about the situation, after reflecting on what he knows to be true about God's promises Habakkuk decides that no matter how bad it gets, the fact that God has acted in the life of his people, and given them blessings and promises... always outweighs whatever hardships or disasters that may occur because he knows God will keep his promises.

That's why Paul is instructing us in Philippians to "Rejoice in the Lord always" – Paul is convinced and is trying to convince us that no matter how bad circumstances may get, the fact that God has included us in his covenant promises as well through Jesus Christ, trumps everything.

This is a source of constant joy, because in the end Christ has overcome everything – sin and evil, sickness, disease, death, poverty, whatever awful situation you can go through Christ's work trumps it.

It doesn't mean we don't feel bad, or suffer, but we know that in the big picture – it's outweighed by what's coming – so rejoice... always.

It would be like having the winning lottery ticket in your pocket - you'd grinning from ear to ear in spite of whatever might happen to you.

You have resources to deal with pretty much anything life throws at you... though you couldn't bring anyone back from the dead.

Friends - we are in the Lord, we are in Jesus - and that's way better than millions of dollars, and death is defeated- Jesus can bring us back from dead – “Yes! – Happy Dance!” Express your joy!

Christian prayer and praying more intentionally begins in the context of joy - the joy of knowing you belong to God in Christ no matter what happens.

Which then enables us to obey to we are commanded to do in verse 6. *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your requests to God.”*

This is so straightforward it can be easy to miss. I've met many people who think that it's improper to bother God with the “insignificant” details of our life.

That's why we throw up the Hail Mary prayers as a last resort, and only in a dire situation.

But, here we have Paul telling us to pray about everything, in fact if there is **anything** that makes you anxious...pray about it.

Are you worried about going to the dentist? Pray about it. Are you nervous about meeting your girlfriend's parents? Pray about it. Are you anxious that you won't find a girlfriend? Pray about. Worried about environmental issues? Politics, health, safety, travel... can't find your car keys? **Whatever** is troubling you - pray about it!

Now this is not new stuff - Paul is echoing what Jesus himself taught. In Matthew 26, in the Sermon on the Mount, we read about Jesus teaching his followers not to worry about their lives, what they will eat or drink.

Now he can do this because he has previously taught them how to ask for whatever they need from their Heavenly Father – give us this day our daily bread... the Lord's Prayer.

So once you've prayed, petitioned, once you've brought to God whatever is making you worry – leave it with God... don't worry about it anymore, trust Him with it.

Jesus goes on to say in Matthew 26 that worrying can't add a single hour to your life, but seeking first God's kingdom leads to eternal life. When you're not worrying you can be focusing on seeking God's kingdom.

The Apostle Paul knows this – in fact he is seeking first God's kingdom by sharing the gospel with people of other religions and nationalities.

He is trusting that God will provide for his basic needs so he can focus on starting new churches.

What Paul tends to worry about and what makes him anxious, are the churches he started and the spiritual growth of these new Christians – not his basic needs.

However, Paul brings these concerns to God in prayer too. At the beginning of this letter to the Philippians he writes

*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, **being confident of this**, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

After praying Paul can leave his concern for their growth in the hands of God.

Friends – this is good news, because “life happens” and God has provided a way for us to bring anything and everything which makes us anxious to Him so he can deal with it.

And we can approach him with an attitude of thankfulness, not fearful cowering, or ritualistic duty.

Now once you are being more intentional and using prayer more proactively you are going to experience what Paul speaks about in verse 7 “The Peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your heart and minds in Christ Jesus.”

By way of contrast - when you’ve sent up a Hail Mary prayer in desperation, do you feel relieved, do you feel better? No, in fact you’re still worried about the situation and there’s no assurance that anything will be done about it.

But with what we’re learning this morning we see here that frequent prayer about our cares and concerns will make us feel better... why, because the Peace of God will guard our hearts and minds.

You give your cares and concerns to God, and in return He gives you His peace. This is not a self-sufficient peace, or a

lack of conflict peace, or a comfortable surrounding peace, it’s the peace of knowing your concerns will be looked after by God – sometimes while having to endure crazy circumstances.

This is why God’s peace transcends all understanding.

It doesn’t make sense to us how we can be in the midst of hardship and suffering and yet be at peace because it seems so logical that our circumstances should dictate our disposition.

How can something as complex as terrorism be solved by God, a disease as devastating as cancer be healed, a life shattered by unspeakable abuse be put back together again?

We can’t fathom how that can happen – it seems impossible. But as Jesus says in Mark 10:27 *“With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”*

When the Christ returns, and brings the Kingdom of Heaven, all things will be made new again, and as a preview and

promise of that God will miraculously demonstrate this in people's lives in the here and now – as an answer to the prayers and petitions that we bring to Him.

And what's more friends – Paul tells us that God's peace guards our heart and mind.

This gives us a picture of a sentry standing guard protecting someone, keeping intruders and thieves away.

Now normally we try to protect our peace – we do whatever we can to control our circumstances, manage our stress, plan to succeed - so we don't lose our peace.

But here we learn that God's peace protects us – we don't have to protect it because God's peace is not dependant on our circumstances, it comes from God when we pray to him.

Our circumstances may continue to be hostile, but God's peace prevents it from assaulting our hearts and minds.

It's easy for our minds to dwell on circumstances, to stew about it, and then our hearts gets worked up about it and we get to a point where our thoughts and our emotions overwhelm us and our capacity to seek first the kingdom of God is lost.

But God's peace protects our kingdom outlook on life so that our thoughts and feelings can be focused on seeing people come to faith in Christ, seeing the creation taken care of properly, seeing people relate to each other in love.

And let me close off friends by assuring us that God's peace is not temporary because Paul says it's in Christ.

The work which Jesus Christ accomplished can never be undone, his uniting God and humanity in his person, his atonement for the forgiveness of sins, his resurrection and his defeat of death.

Nothing can undo Christ's work.

Jesus himself said in John 16:33 *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

Praying intentionally allows us to experience the Peace of God that transcends understanding.

Friends, I don't know anyone who goes through life without trouble, trials or things that make them anxious so I hope that what Christ has spoken to us about prayer this morning will help us to grow beyond "Hail Mary" prayers of desperation.

And so I'm **praying** that we'll continue to grow in our desire and practice of setting aside time daily or weekly to intentionally bringing all our detailed requests about our anxieties and worries to God.

Friends may we experience God's peace. Amen