

WHAT DO YOUR KNEES LOOK LIKE?

2 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5

His name was James. He was the half-brother of Jesus. In other words, he had the same mother as Jesus – Mary - but a different father. James' father was Joseph while Jesus was conceived by God the Father directly in Mary's uterus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Apparently, James only became a follower of his brother, Jesus, after His resurrection. James went on to become the first pastor of the first church – the church in the city of Jerusalem. He was the author of the New Testament letter that bears his name. James died as a martyr by stoning about 30 years after Jesus died and rose again. A close friend made this observation about James: "He was in the habit of entering alone into the temple, and was frequently found upon his knees begging forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like those of a camel, in consequence of his constantly bending them in his worship of God." As a result, James earned an interesting nickname – Old Camel Knees. There are not many Christians in North America who have knees that resemble the knees of camels. What do your knees look like? Take my word for it – mine look pretty good. I'll bet yours do as well. And that may be just the problem.

Today I want to begin a series of four messages on prayer. I'm calling it "Hard Questions About Prayer." Here's a couple of reasons why. First, prayer is one of the most important – if not the most important – act of a Jesus' follower. But it's also one of those aspects of following Jesus that we find very difficult to do with any consistency. The fact is that you can't hear about the value and importance of prayer often enough. Second, our church needs a kind of baptism in prayer. I believe we're on the verge of great and good things in our church. But I'm also keenly aware that whether we experience those great and good things fully may well depend on the frequency and fervency of our prayers. We talk a lot about prayer; the problem is we don't always do much of it or enough of it.

Let's turn to our text today. Those five verses tell us a lot about prayer. What should you pray for? Why should you pray at all? This passage doesn't intend to give you an exhaustive answer to those questions, but it does provide some important and intriguing ones for you to consider.

WHAT SHOULD YOU PRAY FOR?

Paul is finishing up his second letter to the followers of Jesus living in the Greek city of Thessalonica. Like every preacher worth his salt, Paul begins with the word "finally" and then goes on for awhile longer! When a preacher says "finally", it doesn't mean a whole lot. Well, what should we pray for? First of all, Paul tells you that you should be praying for the good news' spread. In other words, you should be praying for the growth, advancement and success of Jesus' offer of a transformed life. You should be praying about and for that all important effort right here at Karl Road, in our community, in our nation and around the world. Notice what Paul says in our passage, "One more thing, friends: Pray for us.

Pray that the Master's Word will simply take off and race through the country to a ground-swell of response, just as it did among you.” (2 Thessalonians 3:1 MSG) Paul longed to see people everywhere in the entire Roman Empire exposed to the transforming message of Jesus. Before he came to Thessalonica, he had shared the good news about Jesus and established churches all over what is now present day Turkey. After establishing a church in Thessalonica, he went down to Athens – the intellectual capital of the Roman Empire – and shared about Jesus there. From there he went on to Corinth in Greece – the commercial capital of the Empire. Eventually, he brought the message of the Lord to Rome itself – the political and administrative capital of the Empire.

Notice how Paul compares the good news about Jesus to a runner who wins a prize. He literally uses the word “run” to describe the spread of this message. The picture is of an athlete – a runner – running quickly, running over and past obstacles, running in such a way as to win a prize at the end of a race. Lots of running is going to be a feature of the Olympics this month. But the prize for Paul isn't a gold medal and worldwide applause. The prize is the hearts of men, women, boys and girls whose lives are transformed by God's grace and love. Don't miss an interesting assumption behind Paul's words. He implies here that the good news of Jesus can get stalled, bogged down or resisted. He further implies that when God's people pray, God releases a spiritual energy that enables the good news to spread more rapidly and get accepted by more people.

Do you pray for the good news' spread? Do you pray for this church and its ministries? In a few weeks, we're going to start up our Wednesday night ministries again. Did you know that this activity has evolved from primarily a fellowship and educational event for our own people when it first got started into a marvelous outreach opportunity into the community? I've been meeting with a planning group this summer seeking to help that ministry become an even more effective instrument to spread the good news. We need your prayers. If you read the last church newsletter, you know that as a church we're going to be involved in an all church program in September and October called “Outflow” which is an effort to help all of us become more outwardly focused as individuals and as a congregation. It's all about the spread of the good news about Jesus. We need your prayers for that effort.

Charles Spurgeon was the pastor of a Baptist church in London in the latter part of the 1800s. He's still acknowledged as one of the greatest preachers of all time. Thousands came to hear him speak every Sunday. Thousands received Jesus as Lord and Savior under his ministry. Other pastors and Christian leaders would come and study Spurgeon's methods. He would often take them down to the basement of that great church in London before the worship service began. There, some 300-400 people from his congregation would gather and pray all through the service and as Spurgeon preached that the Holy Spirit would convict hard hearts and help them turn to Jesus. Is it any wonder the good news

spread? Charles Spurgeon knew he wasn't the cause of the good news' spread. No, it was God's power released through prayer.

Christian, are you praying for the good news' spread? Do you pray faithfully for a missionary family serving somewhere in the world? Do you pray faithfully for a ministry in our community and ask God to help that ministry spread the good news about Jesus? Do you pray that God will enable and empower you to spread the good news to people you live next door to or work with or go to school with or even live with? My friend, you will only ever develop a heart for lost people if you begin to pray and let God change your heart. Some years ago, Mercedes Benz had a TV commercial showing a car colliding with a cement wall during a safety test. Someone then asks a company spokesman why they don't enforce their patent on the Mercedes Benz's energy-absorbing car body. It was a design evidently copied by other car companies because of its success. The spokesman replies matter-of-factly, "Because some things in life are too important not to share." That's true, isn't it? How much more true when it comes to the good news about Jesus. Some things in life are too important not to share! Isn't Jesus at the top of that list?

What should you pray for? Secondly, you should pray for the devil's defeat. "Pray, too, that we will be rescued from wicked and evil people, for not everyone is a believer. But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one." (2 Thessalonians 3:2-3 NLT) The greatest obstacle to the spread of the good news about Jesus is a personal being called Satan and his supernatural forces of evil. Here's what the Bible says about that: "For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12 NLT) Many people today scoff at the idea of a literal devil as an ignorant superstition. Martin Luther's observation is as true today as it was when he made it back in the 1500s. "If you do not believe in the devil, it's because you've never resisted him."

Just put your faith in Jesus for this life and eternity! Just begin to try and live a transformed life in this world! Just begin praying for the spread of the good news about Jesus! You'll start believing in the devil soon enough. Prayer is God's number one weapon against evil. Paul implies here that just as God loves to work through people, so does the devil. As you go through life, you'll run into some Holy Spirit-filled people. Paul says here that you may well run into some devil-filled people occasionally, too. Prayer is your number one tactic in resisting people filled with the power of evil. Pray for the devil's defeat and pray that you'll be delivered every day from his plans and strategies. I love that great observation about prayer from Samuel Chadwick, "Satan dreads nothing but prayer.... The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from prayer. He fears nothing from prayer less studies, prayer less work, prayer less religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray."

What should you pray for? Thirdly, Paul implies that you should be praying for your own faithfulness to the Lord. “Because of the Master, we have great confidence in you. We know you're doing everything we told you and will continue doing it. May the Master take you by the hand and lead you along the path of God's love and Christ's endurance.” (2 Thessalonians 3:4-5 MSG). Satan's a powerful enemy, but he's no match for the Lord. Satan isn't the evil equivalent of God by any means. Your ultimate protection is the Lord Himself and you're reminded here that He is forever faithful. “But the Master never lets us down. He'll stick by you and protect you from evil.” (2 Thessalonians 3:3 MSG)

How does Jesus do that? How does He stick by you and protect you from evil? When you get spiritually lazy, you become a sitting duck for the devil. Jesus is faithful to warn you when that starts to happen – maybe through a sermon, a book or a conversation with a friend. When you get discouraged by life's problems and heartaches, you're a sitting duck for the devil. Jesus is faithful to encourage you. When you commit a sin, you're a sitting duck for the devil. Jesus is faithful to convict you and provide forgiveness when you confess that sin to Him. Here's something I know! I know that I have very little comprehension of how much spiritual protection I receive from the Lord every day. I believe followers of Jesus have a kind of a spiritual force field around us that holds back much of what the devil would like to do to destroy us. God uses your prayers for yourself and the prayers of others for you to keep that spiritual force field strong and effective so that you can remain faithful to Jesus in all things and at all times.

Bob Vernon, a Los Angeles motorcycle cop, saw a red pickup truck speed through a stop sign. Bob turned on his emergency lights and radioed that he was in pursuit. Finally, the pickup truck pulled over and Bob approached. Inside the truck, the driver was seeing his life unravel. He rested his hand on the same gun he'd used a few moments before to rob a 24 hour market. A sack of stolen money was beside him on the seat. Bob Vernon said, “Good morning, sir, may I see your ---.” He never finished the sentence. The driver of the truck fired several shots towards Bob's chest knocking him flat seven feet away. A few seconds later – much to the shock of the truck driver – Bob Vernon got up, pulled his gun and fired twice. The first bullet smashed the windshield while the second went through the truck's door and into the driver's leg. “Don't shoot!” he screamed and threw his gun and the stolen sack of money out of the window. What saved Bob Vernon's life? Kevlar. It's a super strong fabric used for bullet proof vests. It's only 3/8 of an inch thick, but Kevlar can stop bullets cold. May I suggest that prayer is like spiritual Kevlar protecting you from whatever the devil fires at you? Now, this passage has something to tell us about what you should pray for. It also has something to tell us about...

WHY YOU SHOULD PRAY AT ALL?

First of all, prayer gets you into the reality of life itself; in other words, into the way life really is. That may sound ironic because we often assume that people

who have a well-developed prayer life are kind of “other-worldly.” Nothing could be further from the truth! Paul was one of the most intellectually gifted human beings who ever lived. Along with that genius came an iron will and a character as tough as nails. But here we find him humbly asking for the prayerful support of brand new, spiritually immature Jesus followers! He does the same thing in many of the letters he wrote and that are now a part of the New Testament. Why? Paul came to see life the way it really is. The longer he lived and the more he served Jesus, the more he realized how utterly dependent he was upon God for everything and he himself was no match for the devil. How did he put it? “For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.” (Phil. 4:13 NLT)

It’s easy to buy into this illusion that we have lots of control over what happens to us in life. You’ve seen the typical TV talk show interview of the latest celebrity who when asked how he or she has become so successful blinks vacantly, smiles and says, “I believe you can become whatever you want to in life, if you just believe in yourself.” By all means – go ahead and use self-discipline to pursue great dreams, wonderful ambitions and lofty goals. But what happens when you’ve tried your hardest and you still fall short? What do you do when a dream dies? What happens when through no fault of your own and despite your noblest efforts, things just don’t work out the way you wanted or planned?

Prayer is about what real life is about. The fact is that you need God every moment of every day for every conceivable reason. You couldn’t take a breath if it weren’t for God. You need God to provide the means to put food on the table, clothes on your back and a roof over your head. You need God in your marriage and in your family. You need God in every human relationship. You need God where you work, where you go to school, where you live. I’m not in control, but that’s OK, because God very much is! By the same token, you have a formidable enemy who wants to destroy you, your marriage, your family, your kids, your church, your trust in Jesus, your integrity. He’s working hard to keep people blind to their desperate need for God. When Paul asked for prayer, it wasn’t really so much humility as it was simply a concession to reality. He needed God so much. So do you. So do I. The less you pray the more unrealistically you live your life everyday. Prayerlessness is a prescription for spiritual disaster. But prayerfulness is a prescription for spiritual victory.

Why should you pray at all? Secondly, prayer gets you into God’s love. I find that implication in the first part of v. 5, “May the Lord lead your hearts into a full understanding and expression of the love of God...” (2 Thessalonians 3:5 NLT) Prayer has a way of enabling God to get His love into you and then through you He can get His love into others. Prayer makes you more aware of God’s love for you, how much He’s invested in you and how much He cherishes you. Prayer helps you grasp God’s love and experience it. The more you pray, the more you experience His arms of grace and love around you. People who grasp God’s love for them the most – they just get it! – are the same ones who are best at loving others with God’s love. Why’s that? When you realize how much God

loves you, you become a reservoir and a channel of God's love into spiritually dry, thirsty people. How can you get and keep a sense of God's love? Prayer! My friend, the less you pray, the less certain you'll be of God's love for you and the less desire you'll have to love others. By the same token, the more you pray, the more God will assure you of His love and fill you with that love for others.

Why should you pray at all? Prayer gets you into Christ's endurance. The last part of v. 5 says, "May the Lord lead your hearts into a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ." (2 Thessalonians 3:5 NLT) The more you pray, the more opportunity God has to put into you the very strength and endurance of Jesus Himself. Life is full of difficult circumstances and tough experiences. God wants you to stand firm and hold onto Him in the midst of those hard times. He's not interested in somehow propping up your pathetic, feeble self-help efforts. No, instead He's wants to put into you the very perseverance, strength, endurance and stick-to-it-iveness of Jesus Himself. How can you get the strength, the ability or the energy to hang on and hang in when all you want to do is just give up? Prayer! My friend, the less you pray, the more you will try and do in your own strength and the more you will fail. The more you pray, the more you will find the Holy Spirit giving you the energy to live for Jesus with the patience and endurance of Jesus Himself.

The year was 1913. The place was the mountains around Provence, France which had become barren due to careless deforestation. Former villages were deserted because springs and brooks had run dry. Death and devastation ruled the day. Jean Giono was climbing mountains for fun when he came upon a shepherd by the name of Elzeard Bouffier who invited him to spend the night in his simple hut. After dinner, Giono watched Bouffier meticulously sort through a pile of acorns and select 100 perfect samples. Then he went to bed. Giono learned that this shepherd had been planting trees on the wild hillsides around him for over three years. All by himself, Bouffier had planted 100,000 trees, 20,000 of which had sprouted. After World War 1, Giono returned to that area and saw incredible reforestation. Bouffier's efforts had enabled a chain reaction in nature. Water flowed again. The soil supported life again. Animal life returned. Again, Giono returned after World War 2. The now aged shepherd had ignored the war going on all around him and had continued to plant trees. The reformation of the land continued with spectacular results that can still be seen today. When you pray – frequently and fervently and faithfully – you're like that shepherd, Elzeard Bouffier. You're like a spiritual reforester. You dig holes in barren places and plant the seed of spiritual life. Through those seeds – those prayers you offer – God transforms dry spiritual wastelands – a lost person's life, an unhappy home, a negative office environment, even a discouraged church – into places of amazing beauty and productivity. Your prayers matter. They matter to God and His work in this world. Old Camel Knees. Anyone threatening to give you that nickname? So, what do your knees look like?