

Romans 12:12c

12 rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, **continuing steadfastly in prayer**;

This morning we will focus on the third phrase in verse 12.

continuing steadfastly in prayer;

Now let's quickly look at the flow of thought. First we are told to **rejoice in hope**. Remember that means to "can't wait for the good thing that we know is going to happen." So we are positioned by God to live out this life in our sinful flesh for a temporary period of time and Paul tells us we really need to be focused on what is ahead. Then next we are told to be **patient in tribulation**. We looked at the relationship between hope and tribulation. The two are necessarily intertwined. You will never persevere through tribulation without hope, without something that makes it "worth it."

Then this morning's text tells us to **continue steadfastly in prayer**. Why? Well think about it a little bit. Why would prayer be so necessary to people who are gladly awaiting a good thing but suffering some very bad things?

How are you going to make it?

I think the answer strikes most deeply at our most humanity. **We need our Dad**. And we need our Dad **to do something**.

Have you ever watched a toddler when a stranger enters a room? Most of them will instantly locate their mother or father and quickly get to them. They might communicate or they might just cling. But the urge is that they need security. They need protection. They need safety. They need comfort. They need understanding. They need help. And they know just where to go to get it.

Have you ever noticed how many times believers are referred to **as children**? I don't think that is a coincidence. **We need** from God what **our little children** need from us. And God truly is **the source** of all those things for us.

Since we are living in an unsafe world, in a world that intends to hurt us, we too need a Father we can go to, we can lean on, we can find solace in. And God offers that to us. But that practice must be cultivated. It is not quite so inborn as it is with a toddler. We, as adults, **might choose other paths** to get solace and comfort, paths that might not work so well. We might run to other relationships that cannot deliver so well. Here Paul puts it in no uncertain terms. We are to cultivate that relationship relentlessly.

Now let's look at the words.

continuing steadfastly in prayer

Continuing steadfastly is the word in Greek that means to give constant attention to a thing. This word is used in the following passages.

Acts 2:42 (NKJV)

42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Now think about this a little bit. Did they do this every moment of the day? Did they not sleep? Did they not do household tasks? We don't know **to what degree**, but we know they had to be doing some of these things. So this does not mean uninterrupted activity.

Another verse

Acts 1:14 (NKJV)

14 These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

Here the disciples were gathered together before Pentecost. They, too, continued in these activities. Did they do nothing else? Was it unbroken? That would be impossible. They had to sleep. So we interpret the meaning of the word by how it is used.

Acts 2:46 (NKJV)

46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,

Here again we see the same use of the word.

We looked at what it didn't mean. But what **does** it mean? This is the kind of thing that a person's life gravitates around. Not much time elapses before this person is engaged in this activity again. If you were to look at their lives we would use the expression, "they are always doing that."

Any person who talks to Brad would know he has a quick wit and you might say he is always saying something funny. Now that isn't literally true. It is not every moment. But you know if you talk to him enough, he is sure to come back to it. Another person might be said to always be cleaning their house. Another might be said to always be quoting scripture. It is something in a person's life that they will not do without. It is part of who they are and the choices they make. They always gravitate back to it.

Now, how about prayer? What is prayer? It is basically conversation with God, talking to God, speech addressed to God.

When we are talking about prayer it is important that we think clearly. Often we are not clear in how we think and we are a bit muddled in how we pray. I think it is important, right off the bat, that we make some distinctions. Not all prayer is the same. I would divide it into two categories. Please study this for yourself. You may learn something that would be helpful in making our views be more accurate.

As far as I can tell there are two types of requests that we ask of God.

- 1- The first kind is where **we know God's will**. We are praying according to God's promises. We pray things that **we know that God wants**. We ask with an **expectation** that God will provide the exact thing we are asking for. We ask **believing** that God will do that thing. And why will He do it? Because we are **asking** for what God has revealed **He will do**. We are asking for it according to the Name or the interest of Christ. He said He will do it and we pray that He will accomplish what He has promised. That is what "In Jesus Name" is all about.

Look at Elijah. James tells us

James 5:13-18 (NKJV)

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.

14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months.

18 And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

When James talks about the prayer of faith, I think it is most likely that he is talking about a prayer where the person who is praying has been given a special revelation that the person that is sick will be healed. Then that person can pray according to God's known will. They can pray according to God's promise. The answer to the prayer is **not due** to the exceptional faith of the one doing the praying. But the praying is done **according to the will** of the God that is being prayed **to**.

Look at the story of Elijah.

1 Kings 18:1 (NKJV)

1 And it came to pass after many days that the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the earth."

Then Elijah did what he was told and at the end of that he began to pray. And what did he pray for? He prayed for what God had already promised. He prayed that it would rain.

That is exactly the point that James appeals to when he says that the **effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.**

The reason that it accomplishes much is because it is relying upon God to do what God has said.

Frankly, I think there are many things that we cannot pray for that way. Unless I am given specific guidance I may not know if it is God's will to **save** a specific individual. I may not know if it is God's will to **heal** a person. Look at Paul himself. He prayed three times for something that **was not** in God's will. Was there something wrong with **his praying** that it did not avail much? No. It was not the **quality of the prayer** but the **topic** of the prayer that was the problem. It was not in God's will to take away his thorn. Paul was not praying in Jesus name. He had the proper intent but he was not given the insight into **God's** intentions. Many people think that praying in Jesus name means telling God what we want and then stamping Jesus name to the whole process. But the **promises** attached to **praying in Christ's name** are too drastic for this to be true. We are told that we will receive **whatever we ask** for if we ask in Jesus' name. I believe that praying in Jesus name is praying for what Jesus intends to do, praying for what Jesus promises to do. It is confident praying. It is praying that has no fleshly interest. It is praying that promotes God's work being done on earth like it is in heaven. It is praying where **we** get behind **God's will** instead of asking **Him** to get behind **ours**. That is why it is so powerful.

I think it is important to mention this while we are looking at prayer because it is easy to get sloppy in our thinking. And if we are not careful we end up in one of two ditches on the side of the road.

The first ditch is that God is not answering my prayer, therefore there is something wrong with God. This can be disastrous. If you believe that you are in charge of telling God what to do, when He does not acquiesce to your demands, you can easily have a crisis of faith.

If you believe that God promises to heal you from every disease, then all you need to derail your faith is an illness that God does not heal. Soon you will feel that

God is not good at His word. And that is an awful thing for anyone to believe because it is not true. We cannot put God to the test that way. So the first ditch is when our requests go unanswered and we think God is the problem.

The second ditch is when God is not answering my prayer, and I think therefore there is something wrong with me. On this side of the road we figure that God would do this if I would ask just right, if I would have just the right mental attitude, if I would have just the right behavioral track record. This kind of thinking puts us on the rat's wheel that keeps us running fast but we never get anywhere. We soon get to feel that we must **earn** God answering our prayers. I have seen this first hand when it is told to someone that "if they had enough faith God would heal them". Since this person was not healed, it must be because they **did not have enough faith**. Because, the minister would say, God has promised that he will heal every illness a believer has. I think they miss the whole context of what **Jesus said** and what **James said**. We can only pray by faith when we have the substance of God's will revealed to us. Use Paul's prayers as an example. When Paul prays for believers, his prayers are based on the known will of God for believers. He can pray in faith because he is praying according to God's promises. I emphasize these things this morning because I do not want to see any of us in either one of those ditches.

The kind of praying that asks God for something with complete assurance that we will receive that thing, the kind of **effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man** is always based on items that God has revealed, either through His word or through divine guidance. It is not based on wishful thinking regarding those things **we would really like** to see God do.

So the question to ask about the thing we seek to pray about is, "Has God promised that He will do this thing?"

If the answer is yes, we should stick to that prayer to the point of fasting or whatever else it takes until God comes through on His word, because He always will.

But if the answer is no, this is not something that I am sure God has said He will do, then it fits in another category. This is the second category of prayer.

Then it is in the 1 Peter category

1 Peter 5:6-7 (NKJV)

6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time,

7 casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.

Now we are in a different category altogether. We simply do not know the will of God. We don't know what He intends. Now we are calling out to God because He is our high tower. He is our rock. He is our fortress. He is our comforter. We are telling Him about our life situations. We don't know what He is going to do, but we don't **have to know** what He is going to do.

When you were a child and you hurt yourself, who did you run to? Most of us would run to our mom or dad. Now would we know what they were going to do? No. Did we demand that they take away all our pain? Only if we were brats. No, we ran to them because we trusted them to take care of us. Sometimes they would do something that would instantly solve the problem. Sometimes they would do something that would gradually solve the problem. And sometimes they would tell us that we were going to have to bear with the problem.

Now did we determine that we would never go to them with a problem again if they did not immediately take our pain away? No

And did we determine that we must not be asking correctly if they did not immediately take our pain away? That would be absurd. No. We simply trusted them to take care of us. That is how this kind of prayer addresses God.

I say all this because it is important for us to think clearly. We cannot be giving the devil opportunities to hurt us by our mettle headed thinking. When we pray, we should be able to determine what kind of praying we are doing. That will help us to know how we should proceed and what we should expect.

Now back to our text-

continuing steadfastly in prayer

Remember that this means constantly gravitating back to prayer, constantly reorienting to our conversation with God, not going any length of time without being in prayer. Let's see what scripture says about this topic in other places.

Colossians 4:2 (NKJV)

2 Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving;

This verse uses the same word for continuing. To pay constant attention to it. Here Paul adds to be vigilant, it means being watchful in such a way that your life depends upon it. Basically this is telling us that this activity is not optional. It is crucial. We must maintain constant communication with God. We must constantly orient to Him. And as with many verses about prayer, thanksgiving is included.

Any study of the Bible will quickly reveal that thanksgiving is an attitude we must cultivate in our spiritual walk. We have to consciously take notice of the good things that God is doing for us and giving to us. In that way we will keep our prayer directed toward God in a proper manner, not like whining children but grateful children.

Luke 18:1 (NKJV)

1 Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart,

All of Luke 18 is about prayer. It is a very good source on the topic. But it starts with verse one telling us that we ought to pray, that we ought to ask God for those things that are in his will and that we should stick to it. I believe this is talking about category 1 praying.

Ephesians 6:17-18 (NKJV)

17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God;

18 praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—

Here again we are told to pray always. Continually. Persistently.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NKJV)

16 Rejoice always,

17 pray without ceasing,

18 in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Here we have it again. Notice the reference to rejoicing. Then pray without ceasing. Then again to give thanks, no matter what the circumstance.

Matthew 6:7-13 (NKJV)

7 And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

8 Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

These verses are so comforting. We are always to be praying. Why? Is it so we finally get God's attention? Do we need to babble on and on so He will hear us. Do we need to cut ourselves and wail out like the heathen religions?

No, it isn't like that at all.

God is aware. God knows. God cares. Praying does not change any of those things. Prayer is not a work whereby we win favor with God. Prayer is a privilege

from God in which we can share in His plan, in His kingdom, in His will. We can tell him about our concerns. We can see our place in this world. In the same passage Christ continues.

9 In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.

We start with praise and recognition of who God is.

10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven.

We essentially put ourselves in the proper perspective. We are servants of God to do what He wants done.

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

We then ask God for the things we need.

12 And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.

We ask for the forgiveness of sins.

13 And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one.

We ask for God's intervention in our lives to keep us for Himself

For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

We end by recognizing why we are here. We recognize God's Sovereignty and reign over our world. And we are here to serve Him in that context.

This isn't necessarily **what** we should always pray. But this is **how** we are to pray.

These are the elements that should come out in our constant communication with God. Praise, thanks, requests, confession, and purpose.

How should we not pray?

James 4:2-3 (NKJV)

2 You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.

3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

In our constant reorientation to God, our constant reorientation to prayer, we should not allow flesh to drive us. We must reorient according **who God is** and submit ourselves to His will like the Lord showed us in His teaching. We cannot reverse it. Prayer is not ultimately about **us**. It is **us** being **about God**. Prayer will allow us to receive what is needed in our situations, but what is needed is **not** more of **us**. It is more of **Jesus**.

Let's look at another passage.

Philippians 4:6-7 (NKJV)

6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;

7 and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

I really think these verses give us some insight into our constant communication with God.

We don't need to worry. We have already covered that. But what should we do instead?

We let God know what we think we need or what we think He wants done.

And how do we do it?

By prayer and supplication.

And what is our attitude as we do it?

Thanksgiving. We **know** this God we are coming to. We **know** this God has given us wonderful gifts. We **know** this God sent Christ to die in our place. We know we are the most fortunate people on the planet. So we come to Him in that attitude. We are not demanding. We are not full of flesh. We come to Him to get good things because **we know** that He gives good things.

And what is the result? Peace. We will have peace amid the most trying circumstances. Why? We are in constant contact with our Dad. We can hide behind Him. We know He will take care of us. We know He has the power to protect us. We know if something happens to us **it is ok**. He will make it turn out for our good.

You see, this passage is not demanding a tremendous work of discipline. It is more reminding us of the resource we have available to us. We need to keep calling out to our heavenly Father. Our hearts need to praise Him. Our minds need to thank Him. Our voice needs to ask for those things we need. We need to keep our hearts in communion with him by confessing our sins. And in the end, we have got to keep remembering what we are, as Mike would say, sucking wind for.

And there is one more thing about prayer that I would be remiss if I did not bring up. Especially in light of the focus of last weeks sermon.

Luke 11:11-13 (NKJV)

**11 If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone?
Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish?**

12 Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?

13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

I said last week that we cannot allow our hope to be placed upon anything that God does not promise us. But there is a sense in that our hope should be placed, not on an event, but on a person. Our hope is in Jesus Christ.

So when we pray to Him, what should we expect? Should we expect Him to be even more cruel than we are? Not at all. We should expect Him **to be more kind** than we are. If your kid asks for food, what will you give them? Will you make a mudpie and laugh as they try to eat it? Some parents might, but most would not. Even **we** are more kind and loving than that. And whatever might be true about God, you can rest in this truth. **He is better than we are.** So if we would treat our children well, how would you think He would treat His children? Even better. And if we would give our children the best things we had to offer if they wanted them, wouldn't God even give better. We might give an egg or a fish. But our Father will give the Holy Spirit. We might give the means of temporal life. He will give the means of eternal life. The point is- **expect good things from God.** Look to Him as a God that is worthy of thanks because He is always giving us good things. Go to Him with that attitude, even in the hardest of times. Trust in the character of God. You will never be disappointed, no matter what the temporary turmoil may bring.

So the application for this morning is simple. Take note this week of how many times your heart and mind gravitate back to God in prayer. Just pay attention and note it. Track it this week.

Maybe you will find that it happens all the time. That is good. That is how it is supposed to be.

I had a week's head start on this project and what I found was not as positive. In fact this is one sermon I wish someone else could have preached because it is a weakness in my life.

As I pondered that this week I considered the reasons.

If we are not continually re-orienting around God, **why is that?** There can only be so many answers to that question.

Maybe we don't trust God.

We will never run to a God we don't trust, a God we don't really believe loves us and wants what is best for us. In fact, we will do all we can to ignore and exclude a God like that. So maybe we don't pray because really, we don't like who we are praying to.

Maybe we don't want God.

Maybe much of what we intend to do is in the fleshly realm. So really, we don't want God involved in our lives because we know His Holy Spirit will just convict us and remind us that what we are doing is not in faith. So we don't pray because we don't really want God's fellowship in how we are choosing to live and to think.

Maybe we don't remember God.

Maybe we are like Martha, getting our to-do list done. We are absorbed in the cares and anxieties of this life to the degree we are simply **too busy** for God. He has to wait in line just like everyone else. We may have good reasons for all the things we feel we need to do, but we continually miss the "ONE THING" that is important.

Maybe we don't need God.

Maybe the things we are doing in a week don't require the power of God. Maybe we are not fighting the good fight or running the good race. Maybe we are just living a self oriented life. If so, we really don't need God as long as the money is coming in and there are groceries in the pantry.

Maybe we don't know God.

If you are here this morning and you see Christianity as just a bunch of things you can do and can't do, you have never met Jesus Christ. You do not understand salvation. And it stands to reason that you don't gravitate to God in prayer. Why would you?

No, once you really **understand your sinfulness**, just how far short of God's glory you fall.

Once you understand that it is because of **your sin** that Christ died, and that he **took the wrath of God upon Himself for your sin**.

Once you understand that, by faith, **his sacrifice can count for you** and you can be free of that damning burden.

Once you understand that Christ was born, died and was resurrected for the benefit of every believer who would ever live.

Once all of that hits you between the eyes, your life will change from the inside out. God will do a powerful work in your life and you will find yourself gravitating toward your heavenly Dad. Where God is concerned, **to truly know Him is to love Him**. And it is only natural to gravitate to Him in all you do.

So this week, let's look at 1- Do I gravitate to God and prayer. And 2- If not why not?