

Before We Pray for Safety

Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. —Matthew 6:9-10

And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.

—Acts 20:22-24

Over the years I have become mindful of the focus of our prayers and have noticed just how much time and energy we spend in presenting to God our many concerns for health and safety. Consider the prayer concerns listed in our bulletin and ponder the burdens of our hearts which drive most of our prayers. It is understandable and right that we should pray for our health and the health of others, and the Gospels are loaded with pleas made to Jesus for healing, which our Lord gladly honored. The lion's share of our prayers usually focuses upon such concerns, and while it wouldn't be fair to call this wrong, something is certainly missing.

I learned a valuable lesson about prayer some years ago when the congregation I was serving began sending out youth to summer work camps. The camps were directed toward home repairs for low-income people, most of whom were from the working poor. A group of us back home were asked to gather at times during that week for prayer for our young delegation of Christian servants, and while we were asked to petition the Lord for a number of matters, you can guess what the focus of it all was. We did know that the week involved many miles on the road to get there and back, ladders, rooftops and lots of sharp tools, and so our prayers included numerous and heartfelt requests for safety. It should be added that these prayers were answered, so we did feel relief and joy.

After a few years I was able to join in two of these wonderful ventures, and it was amazing how my prayer life changed in those weeks. We leaders prayed a lot for the poor and elderly folks that we were serving and asked God to give them comfort and the knowledge of His love for them in Christ. We prayed that the whole experience would be an exercise in encouragement, among the young, the leaders and those we were serving. We prayed that Jesus' love and presence would be experienced by many. We prayed for teamwork, and that the work we did would be of a high quality. We prayed that our young people would rethink their faith and consider what life is like for those who are not as financially blessed as they are. We prayed that the whole project and the many homes repaired would be a witness to the wider neighborhoods where we served. And yes, we prayed for safety, for there were many miles travelled, and there were ladders, roofs and sharp tools.

There is nothing wrong with health and safety prayers, but there is much more we can be praying for. Too often our prayers are motivated only by our fears and lack any fuller vision. I am frequently jarred by the Lord's Prayer as it repeatedly reminds me that my real passion should not be about myself, or even my closest loved ones, but about God and the Kingdom! Late in the Book of Acts we find Paul travelling to Jerusalem, and the believers he met along the way all warned him of dangers ahead. They prayed for his safety, but Paul kept praying that the Good News of Jesus continue to spread.

These days the virus has occupied our prayers, and we do well to pray against this nasty bug. But let us be careful that our focus be upon higher matters than our preservation. Good as health and safety may be, it is sad when this becomes our only focus, and we forget to zealously pray that the infectious Good News of life in Christ would spread through the whole neighborhood and keep on spreading! One of the deadliest effects of the Covid virus is that it can take our focus away from Jesus and the Kingdom's work.

Let us pray for our wellbeing, but let that not be our only prayer. Years ago, a seminary professor's example of praying before travelling in his car rubbed off on me. It's a great habit, and I have since gotten into the practice of making a small addition to that prayer, which might be a prayer for the person or task to which we are travelling, or simply thanks for the gift of another day and the privilege of work and family. Let us continue to pray for health and safety, and let us be sure to pray for a lot more.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

Father, I am seeking: I am hesitant and uncertain, but will you, O God, watch over each step of mine and guide me. —Augustine, 354-430

May God Almighty direct our days in his peace and grant us the gifts of his blessing; may he deliver us in all our troubles and establish our minds in the tranquility of his peace; may he so guide us through things temporal that we finally lose not the things eternal. —Gregorian Sacramentary, 6th century