

# Contending Prayer

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[0:00] And I get to continue us on in our prayer series. Last week, Elliot did a fantastic job on spiritual warfare. Epaphras, this guy on Paul's apostolic team.

Paul's writing to the Colossian church. Epaphras, who actually was integral in starting the Colossian church. And he says, he's one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus.

And he sends his greetings. And then Paul says this. Epaphras is always struggling on your behalf in his prayers. That you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you. And also for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. This is God's word. That word struggle that we see there is to, that word contend.

It's where we get the idea. And so from this, we're going to look at what it means to contend. We're going to look at why it's necessary for God's people to contend.

[1:30] And then also, what are we supposed to be contending for? And finally, we're going to look at how it connects us to the heart and the ministry of Jesus for his church. And that's kind of where we're going today.

So first, what does it mean to contend? Well, in the Bible, when you come across this word contend, it is often translated from a Greek word that we get the English word agonize. Okay? There's a sense of agonizing over something. What do we agonize over? We agonize over things that are very important to us, things that we love, things that are significant. And from kind of a word study of this in the Greek lexicon and how it's used throughout the Bible, it says this about this word contend.

It's this picture that gives us intense exertion in the pursuit of victory, whether on a literal battlefield, an athletic arena, or the spiritual plane.

And every New Testament occurrence casts the believer in an arena where determined, costly effort is required to reach a God-appointed goal.

[2:32] The word never connotes earning salvation by works. Instead, it portrays the strenuous, spirit-enabled response of faith to God's gracious call.

So to agonize, to contend in the Christian life is to fight. It is to struggle fervently and with steadfastness. It's used by Jesus, this word and how it's used by Jesus and the apostles portrays the Christian life as an arena of spirit-empowered exertion.

From the moment one enters the narrow gate until receiving the victor's crown, we believers, we contend.

We contend against sin, we contend against unbelief, and we contend against satanic opposition. Confident that Christ has already secured the decisive victory.

To contend with persistence means that the things in God's kingdom will not always come easily. And sometimes persistence in prayer is required before God will work.

[3:43] To say it another way, kingdom breakthroughs, the things we want to see, his kingdom come, his will to be done, is often preceded by the persistent prayers of the church.

And this is simply a mystery. But it is proven many times in the Bible and by Jesus himself. He said in Luke 18 to his disciples and to those listening that they would not lose heart and give up.

And he said about prayer, keep on praying and be bold and be, and he gives this parable of this persistent widow who keeps going to this judge and pestering this judge for justice until she gets it.

And then again in Luke 11, Jesus commands us as he's speaking on prayer to ask and to seek and to knock. And he says this in Luke 11 verse 5. He said to them, which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, friend, lend me three loaves.

For a friend of mine has arrived on a journey of, I have nothing to set before him. And he will answer from within, do not bother me. The door is now shut. My children are with me in bed.

[4:45] I can't get up and give you anything. And I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence, literally that word is yet because of his persistence, he didn't walk away at the first no.

He kept knocking again and knocking again. Need bread. Need bread. Need bread. That friend is going to rise and give him whatever he needs. You know, one of the things growing up in my household and in my neighborhood, my mom every so often would run out of ingredients for dinner and she would say, Jesse, come here.

Yeah? I teach you to go to the neighbors. Ask Mr. Norton to borrow a couple of eggs. Borrow, right? Like we were going to give them back. Or to the Stoltzes across the street, we need some milk. And I just want to say, I hated doing that at 4 p.m. If she asked me to do that at midnight, oh my Lord. But that's Jesus' point.

Contending in prayer isn't a formula to figure out. It's not like, okay, we just got to pray into something 10 times and then God responds in predictable ways.

[5:57] Trying to figure out how our prayers, these contending prayers work within God's sovereignty isn't a theological problem to solve. It is just a mystery to live in.

Jesus says simply make yourself a nuisance in prayer. Like do that. Persist in prayer. Because in the asking, you get your answer.

Verse 10. For everyone who asks, receives. And the one who seeks, finds. And to the one who knocks, it will be opened. Now I want to say this little quick aside. It doesn't say everyone who asks, seeks, and knocks receives every time.

It just says receives. As the Apostle James puts it, you have not because you ask not. Or as the Apostle Wayne Gretzky put it, you miss all the shots you don't take. Now this begs the question, why can't God just answer prayers right away?

Especially if they're aligned to his will, right? If we're praying, Lord, we want to see your kingdom break in. We want to see your kingdom come. Why not more kingdom breaking in? Well, we do have to remember that everything God does, whether it is yes, no, wait.

[7:08] He does for our benefit. To include making us more like him. And here's an important God character that he wants us to be like. And this characteristic is not intuitive to our sinful nature.

And it's this thing called faithfulness. And God requires perseverance in prayer to teach us faithfulness. To grow faithfulness in us.

So how can you grow? See, just think about this. How can you and I grow in faithfulness if God just gives us everything we ask for right away? How can that happen? The very nature of faithfulness means waiting in the unresolved.

And in that space, God wants to teach us the virtue of not giving up so easily, right? Let's consider two types of people, right? And these, look, I'm not talking about anybody in this room.

This is just a hypothetical, okay? You got one guy who's had 20 jobs in 10 years, been married four times, has no savings. A second guy has worked at the same job for 15 years, been married for 20 years, and has a healthy retirement.

[8:16] What we are going to deduce from the fruit of their lives, that one is faithful and reliable and seems to be able to persevere through difficulties, and the other doesn't. The other seems to, at every point of hardship, seems to just give up and walk away into something new and something else.

We would consider one mature and trustworthy, and the other probably still acting more like an impulsive child. Faithfulness is a big deal. In this world of instant gratification, God's people, what we have to give to our neighbors and our friends and our families and our coworkers and those around us, we have this chance to show them a better way of being, showing them more of who

God is in this way.

One of the tragic heart formations that comes with instant gratification is entitlement, whereas persistence in the unresolved fosters gratitude in the heart.

I think I've shared this story before, but when I was very young, going to the toy store with my mom, we'd go there to buy gifts for other friends, and I would always walk down the aisle and check things out, and there was this one thing that I would pick up.

It was a Lone Ranger set, man. It was so cool. It was in this box about this big, and it had the cap gun with the white handle, and it had a holster, and it had a mask, and it had the red scarf, and I loved the Lone Ranger.

[9:39] I wanted to be like the Lone Ranger. I wanted to pretend that I could be him, and I would always pick this thing up and show my mom, and I'm like, hey, I really, really love this. I really, really want this because faith without hints is dead, right?

So my parents knew how much I wanted this thing, and every time we went into Toy City in La Haber, California, it was like I was like beeline for that same thing, and it was like there was nothing else in that aisle except for that Lone Ranger toy set.

Months and months went by, and then finally on my birthday, I tore back the wrapping paper on a present, not expecting it, and there it was. And I remember jumping up and down and running around to my parents and my grandparents and being like, I can't believe I got it.

I can't believe I got it. The Lone Ranger said, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you. Now, it was in the waiting with hope, hopeful anticipation that prepared my heart to receive it.

The gratitude grew in my heart. So be thankful that God doesn't always answer your prayers right away. Think about it, the hungrier the stomach, the more satisfying the meal, right?

[10:53] What does all this mean for us? What does this mean for you and me, for God's people? Well, wait patiently for God to act, but don't stop asking, because this world needs the church's persistent petitions.

And this begs the question, what should the church be praying for? What should you and I be contending for? Well, we should bring our needs, and that's important.

But we also must learn to pray beyond ourselves. When you look at the prayers of the prophets in the Old Testament, and the prayers of the apostles in Jesus in the New Testament, it had very little to do with the comfort, protection, and healing of the people.

Instead, they were kingdom-focused. We see prayers contending for salvation. We see prayers contending for mercy and justice. We see prayers contending for the church of God's people to be faithful, and for their faith, and for their witness.

And I want to say, including that, we also see prayers contending for unmet desires. And those are good, too. And all of these things are important and to contend for, because these things are kingdom-first praying.

[12:02] It's the advancement of the gospel that we desire, and that is so important. And God desires kingdom partners, his people working together and contending in prayer together.

I just got a text from the guy who created the Saint Jesus Journal, the kind of tool a lot of us use for our personal devotion times, and even together.

And he was telling me how, actually, the African Inland Church he's been working with, how the gospel is spreading in wonderful ways in that region.

And God's using this tool to bring that out as well and to deepen the disciples' walk with him. And I get to step back, and I get to see that, and I get to rejoice, but I also get to, he invited me to pray and contend with him that God would advance the gospel there and continue to advance the work. And it's a privilege for me to stop and be able to do that. We get to contend on these multiple fronts. We want people saved and rescued, for instance, power and penalty, right?

[13:06] And Jesus said, man, pray for laborers. We pray for laborers to be able to go into the harvest. It's ready and it's ripe. We want to pray for more people to say, Lord, here I am, use me.

And we also want to see the mercy and justice of the kingdom bear out in our communities, in our neighborhoods, in our cities, in our nation. We also want to pray, Lord, here I am, use me.

We should be contending in prayer for the poor and the powerless, for the abused who live in the fear of petty tyrants, for those who are in a different kind of prison that robs human dignity and cultivates a spirit of hopelessness.

We want to pray for the orphan and the widow. We want to pray for the immigrant and the foreigner, what the Bible called them sojourners. The least of these are close to God's heart and they are at the center of God's redemptive plan.

Like Paul, like one of the encouragements to Paul when they release him to go preach the gospel is go do all those things but don't forget the poor. And he says, oh yeah, yeah, no, I'm eager. I'm eager to minister to them.

[14:20] But along with that, praying out there, praying for those things and wanting to say, hey God, use me, how can you use me? We gotta be praying for the church too.

The more I read Paul's prayers in his letters, the more I see a common thread. He prayed for their faith, he prayed for their endurance and to grow in the knowledge of Jesus and in the Father's love and the power of the Spirit at work with them.

There are many prayers in the Bible that we see contending for the church but here's a couple of ones I just want, like just to kickstart you, just to show you.

These are some of Paul's prayers for the church in the New Testament and I wanna show that to you because write them down, get that reference. I wanna say this, I pray these prayers often over this church now.

They're some of the best prayers I can pray for us. And when I pray them for you, when I pray them for us as a collective, as I go through your guys' names individually, Lord, I feel drawn deeper into the heart of the Father and feel like, man, I am contending with him.

[15:28] I am contending with the Savior for you guys in this way. But I shouldn't be the only one doing that. This is not what good Christians do.

This is what Christians do. This is who we are meant to be. We're for each other, we're family. So far we talked about contending in prayer for salvation, justice, and mercy for the church but I just wanna bring us back to this next one which is important to you because it's more personal for you and me.

Contending for your unmet desires. Hannah was barren and kept contending with God for a child. Contending in prayer for a spouse or kids or job or healing or victory over a particular sin or maybe a relationship to be restored.

These are all good things to be contending for. Those are good personal unmet desires to agonize over in prayer. And these feel some of the most difficult ones to pray for, to keep coming back for because they are so personal to us.

And when God doesn't answer them it can make us wonder if God cares or maybe there's something wrong with us that we need to fix. Many faithful God-fearing people have walked that painful road with God.

[16:50] Some eventually get their prayers answered. Some don't. But regardless, those who persist testify to the same thing. When we contend in prayer we find out the different ways that God fights for us.

When you go to the Psalms and you carefully read them especially the ones that are lamenting injustice. The lamenting just being a burden for things or it feels like enemies are winning and having victory over us.

Sometimes even the dark ones where you see David calling out for God's judgment on his enemies. You start to realize that these prayers these contending prayers in the Psalms they aren't wrestling against God to pin them down to get what we want.

They're calling out to God for help. They're coming in to him because we are the poor and the needy. We are weak and we're helpless and we're coming to him and said man, Lord, we need you to intervene but we're also trusting that God knows when and how to do that.

See, when we pray for God's intervention we aren't struggling against him. But we're drawing near to him. And the more we draw near to him the more we move into the Father's heart the more we realize and discover that he actually is he's the one who contends for us.

[18:10] He does that. And he has. At the heart of God's grace in his salvation work is this doctrine of propitiation and it just means that

God's wrath has turned to favor.

Not because of anything we've done but because Jesus earned that in our place. He did something we can never do. His death on the cross is the propitiation that has secured the Father's heart toward us to be one of benevolence kindness and goodness.

As 1 John 4:10 puts it in this is love not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation to be the sacrifice that turned God's wrath to favor for our sins.

See what the apostle John is saying to you and me and to the church in his day and for all time God didn't wait for us to get our act together. While we were still in sin which means that you and me there's a time in our lives where we were contending against God.

We were rejecting his authority we were disobeying his commands even denying his existence and despite all that still he chose to offer up his own son Jesus Christ to satisfy his wrath for our sin and so instead because of that instead of living under the impending curse of judgment now we get to live under the smiling face of our heavenly Father.

[19:47] And yet we know that doesn't make our lives trouble free. Why is that? There's an interesting passage in the book of Judges after Israel had come in and possessed the land, right?

You have the whole book of Joshua where they're coming in and they're fighting battles pushing the enemy out taking land possessing it but God didn't give them victory over all the nations in that land.

He wanted some of Israel's enemies to remain there and here's why. Judges 3 verse 1 it says now these are the nations that the Lord left to test Israel by them.

That is all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations those coming generations of the people of Israel might know war.

To teach war to those who had not known it before. Spiritual warfare. These are the nations the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived in Mount Lebanon from Mount Baal Hermon as far as Lebo Hamath.

[21:03] They were for the testing of Israel to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. See friends whether it's a Philistine or a mean boss God ordains trials to test our faith to teach us war to help us to learn how to walk in obedience.

He wanted the generations of Israel to know war and to teach them. The church in every generation we're going to face many adversities. We will. But like Elliot pointed out last week we do not wrestle against flesh and blood.

Our warfare is in the heavenly places. There are principalities and powers at work to deceive to disrupt to distract to discourage the saints of God to get their eyes off of him and eyes on their problems to wonder if God really cares and is he really there?

Will he come through? Maybe there is a better way than trusting in him and waiting on him. And as we contend in prayer that's our fight back against those things.

That's our fight back against what the enemy would try to get us to do to stop walking with our savior. And as we contend in prayer what we find is that God is indeed with us.

[22:37] He sees all those things. He knows all those things. And we also find and we remember that he is for us. And that his plans for you and for me and his church are ultimately good.

And we have the privilege that we get to fight with him who contends for us. And I love this passage in Isaiah 49 this promise.

For thus says the Lord even the captives of the mighty shall be taken and the prey of the tyrant be rescued for I God will contend with those who contend with you and I will save your children.

I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh. That's a tough one. And they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh all people shall know that I am the Lord your Savior and your Redeemer the mighty one of Jacob.

That is the good news of the gospel. That is the thing that keeps us hopeful that keeps us contending that keeps us persisting in prayer. The more we trust and believe that God is for us the more encouraged you and I will be to continue to contend in prayer.

[23:56] There is no clear picture that God is for us than the cross. Jesus died that we might live with him. And yet another doozy is to understand that Jesus is in heaven right now always contending for his people always living to intercede for us.

Have you ever wondered what that means that Jesus is up there interceding for you and for me? Like what is he doing? What is he saying? Well, he prayed this prayer from John 17 in front of his disciples before he was crucified.

And it is a contending prayer. It is an interceding prayer to the Father on our behalf. And I think we can learn a lot from that both as a gift of grace to you and me to encourage our hearts but also a gift of grace to you and me to embolden us in the same way that our Savior is doing unceasingly until the work is done and he returns calling us into this calling of contending and interceding for each other and for his church.

John 17 verse 9 I am praying he's to his Father Father in heaven I am praying for them his disciples I'm not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me for they are yours all mine are yours and yours are mine and I am glorified glorified in them and I am no longer in the world but they are in the world and I am coming to you Holy Father keep them in your name which you have given me that they may be one even as we are one 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 except the son of destruction that the scripture might be fulfilled but now I am coming to you excuse me to you and these things I speak in the world that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves I have given them your word and the world has hated them because they are not of the world just as I am not of the world

I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one that they are not of the world just as I am not of the world sanctify them in the truth your word is truth and as you sent me into the world father so I have sent them into the world and for their sake I consecrate myself I set myself apart that they also may be sanctified they also may be set apart in the truth and he goes on to say this he is just not talking about his disciples right in front of them he goes on to say this I do not ask for these only but also for those who will believe in me through their word that they may all be one just as you father are in me and I in you that they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me we get to bear witness the glory that you have given me I have given to them that they may be one even as we are one

[27:11] I in them you and me that they may become perfectly one union with Christ unity of the saints so that the world may know that you sent me and love them even as you loved me father I desire that they also whom you have given me may be with me where I am keep them to the very end so that they may see my glory that you have given me because you love me for the foundation of the world friends that's probably to some degree what is happening in heaven right now every single day every single moment unceasingly Hebrews says he ever lives to intercede for his people our savior is contending for us when we engage in contending prayer whether that be for the church or for the gospel to advance for God to be glorified through our unity and love for one another or if we are contending for healing and restoration for righteousness and justice to flow like rivers what you begin to realize is that you are joining in fellowship which is participation that fellowship word in the Bible is also a closeness but also a participation with you are participating with your great high priest

Jesus Christ there is a fellowship there to know there is a knowledge of your savior to know that can only be accessed if you choose to join in contending prayer you are contending alongside him knowing his heart for sinners and sufferers and saints alike my final thought my final encouragement the advancement of God's kingdom may not be easily won we may face adversity but nevertheless he's won the victory he fights for us he calls us to fight with him and we have a clear calling to contend for it in prayer amen as the band comes up and we look to respond in a moment we're gonna take communion and I wanna say to you if you're here you're not yet a follower of Jesus before you come to communion you come to your savior who contended for you who came and sacrificed himself willingly according to the father's purpose to be the way the truth

and the life for you and he invites you to come to him right now to put your faith in him he was the sacrifice that turned God's wrath to favor and you can you can experience that you can live in that reality the smiling face of God the benevolent father who looks upon you and his his attitude towards you and his desire towards you is to bless you to know him and know his unchanging love he invites you into that and that isn't something you earn it is given as a free gift and it's through grace it's through faith there's gonna be a prayer on the screen that will lead you if you don't wanna know how to respond and don't know how to respond there'll be a prayer that you can pray while we're taking communion and for those of us that are followers of Jesus getting ready to take communion

I'm gonna say this to you communion reminds us that although there are many battles left to fight Jesus has won the war the power of sin and death is no more for those who are in Christ Jesus so today let communion be a celebration of Jesus who has contended for us and he's won and who is still contending for us to bring us all the way through all the way home pray with me so Jesus we are coming to you some salvation some with thanks some with renewed conviction Lord we thank you that you invite us to come to you bless this time may those who are coming to you in salvation feast on your grace and your love for the first time for those of us who are coming to communion let us feast on your grace and your goodness once again  
I pray this in your name amen amen