



I have in front of me five smooth stones. Even before I say anything about those stones, most of you know what I'm talking about. Your mind goes back to the story of a boy named David. You know the story...

David was one of the sons of Jesse. He was a shepherd boy. His life was dull. The same thing every day; lead the sheep to grass, then to water, then to grass, and then to the pen. And then get up and do the same thing the next day. And the sheep he had weren't just slow, they were dumb, real dumb.

There'd been times of excitement in the past. Like when a lion or bear attacked his flock. That was excitement! But on this day the only ones in his family facing any excitement were his three oldest brothers. They were in the army fighting the Philistines. He'd love to trade places with them, or even just find out what was happening at the battlefield.

Fortunately for David, he wasn't the only one who was wondering. His dad wanted to know how those boys were doing. So David got his big break from boredom. His dad sent him to the battlefield to check on them. That's when he saw him. Goliath wasn't your usual soldier. Not even your usual big soldier. He was 11 feet tall. And he wasn't skinny. He was thick enough to wear armor that weighed 110 lbs. If I were David, I'd say that's all the excitement I need; I'm going back to my sheep.

But David was ready to fight this giant. Everyone thought he was crazy. How could a mere shepherd boy fight a giant? That's like the local little league team taking on the New York Yankees. But he finally talked them into it. So David goes into battle. It says, *"...he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine"* (1 Sam 17:40).

You know the rest of the story. He only needed one, but he took five stones. Those stones are symbolic of David's preparation for victory against the most outrageous odds. They're symbolic of the reasons why David gained the victory over the forces of evil.

Here in the book of Ephesians we've been talking about spiritual warfare. Last week we heard Paul remind us we're all in a battle. Our battle isn't with flesh and blood but with the spiritual forces of darkness. Paul told us to be strong in the Lord and to *"put on the full armor of God"* so we'll be able to stand against the devil

and his schemes. He told of several pieces of God's armor, all of which are necessary in this battle.

This brings us to the close of this letter. Usually the end of a letter is filled with trivialities that don't matter that much. But this letter is different. Paul ends this letter by offering up five smooth stones for life and ministry in this dark world. It's like once we have the armor of God on, there are some other things foundational for their deployment.

All-Prayer

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people (v. 18).

The most important stone is prayer. Look what Paul says. So we put on the armor of God. We're ready for battle. Ready to face the enemy. We've got the belt of truth fastened around our waist, the breastplate of righteousness, the boots of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit. We're ready to stand against anything the enemy throws at us! But then what happens? Paul says the fully equipped Christian soldier must now fall to his knees! Yes, there'll be action, but we can only fight in utter dependence on God, expressed in prayer.

John Bunyan called this "All-Prayer" because Paul uses that word "all" several times ("all occasions...all kinds of prayers...all the Lord's people"). There are several elements of this All-Prayer which are necessary for us to be able to fight.

He says to *"pray in the Spirit."* What does that mean? He's talking about the Holy Spirit. He helps us pray. Paul explained this in more detail in Rom 8: 26b–27, *"We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God."* It's like the Spirit, who lives in us, prays through us and for us. And of course he knows the will of God. Apart from the Spirit's help, our prayers are limited to our own reason and intuition, but with his help they move to a higher level. The Spirit of God, of course, works in conjunction with the word of God, which also informs us of his will. But the Spirit will also settle certain things in our heart to pray for with the conviction they're the will of God. Sometimes God lays something or someone on your heart to pray for and that usually

means he plans to answer it. Someone asked George Müller if he really believed that two men whose salvation he'd prayed for over 50 years would come to faith, he replied, "Do you think God would have kept me praying all these years if He didn't intend to save them?" They both eventually came to Christ.

He also says we're to pray "*on all occasions...*" So we pray when things are going well and when things are falling apart. We pray when we feel like it and we pray when we don't. We pray when we're busy and we pray when we're bored. In 1 Thess 5:17 Paul even says "*pray without ceasing.*" How can you do that? How can I be praying right now? Maybe we have to redefine prayer. Prayer isn't just talking to God; prayer is a posture of the heart towards God. It's a posture of openness, listening, dependence and communion. Thomas Kelly wrote, "There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we can be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship, and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings."

He also talks about "*all kinds of prayers and requests.*" What are the different kinds of prayers and requests he has in mind? They're as varied as the circumstances that require prayer. There's confession, praise, thanksgiving, intercession, meditation. There's prayer for small, seemingly insignificant things, and prayer for matters of life and death, heaven and hell. There's prayer that's a prolonged struggle, a wrestling with God that lasts through the night, and there's the quick prayer we shoot up to God. Remember Nehemiah? He had an urgent but risky request to make to the King. The King noticed he had something on his heart and asked him what it was. Nehemiah writes, "*Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king...*" (Neh 1:4b).

Finally, he says, "*be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.*" Another translation says, "with all perseverance and petition for all the saints." You get the sense prayer requires sweat; some hard work. You have to stay at it. The world can numb us into thinking we can get along just fine without it, so we have to stay alert and awake. And how is it that we could pray for "*all the Lord's people*"? That's a long prayer list! But do you ever do that? Do you ever pray for God's people all over the world? This is what we call intercessory prayer—prayer on behalf of others. There are believers all over the world who need our prayers.

How's your prayer life? That question almost always invokes guilt in people. Most of us know how hard this is; most of us know we could do so much better in the prayer department. It's probably no coincidence that this week my own prayer life kind of stunk. So how can we take some steps, even small steps, towards this

All-Prayer Paul describes? Here are a few things that have helped me:

Word

Use Scripture to help you pray. Locate some of the great prayers of the Bible and use those as a template for praying for others. Or let your reading for that day inform how you pray. God's word is fuel for your prayers; without it you will run out of gas.

Write

As you pray, write your requests in a notebook. Write down all the times God answers your prayers. You'll be encouraged when you're able to see how faithful he's been to you. Maybe keep a journal beside you while you're praying. Many times God will speak to you or give you an idea while you're praying. This will help you keep track of what God is saying to you.

Worship

I think we often grow weary and even bored in our prayer life because we start in the wrong place. Start with God. Start with who he is. Remember who he is and worship him. Sing to him. Play a worship song on your iPod or pull out your hymnbook.

Creativity

Get out of your prayer rut. Take a prayer walk. Drive to Half Moon Bay and pray while you watch the waves crash against the cliffs. Do a silent retreat. Just stop talking to God and listen.

Partnership

Have others you're committed to pray with on a regular basis. Maybe it's a small group or a prayer partner. We're not in this alone. Husbands and wives, families, coworkers and friends can help each other by praying together.

Our staff devotes one staff meeting a month to prayer. This past week we each got a note card and were told to put one request on it. We then dropped them all in a basket and mixed them up and then pulled out someone else's request and prayed for that request. We prayed for almost an hour. It was wonderful to have South Campus people praying for North Campus, and Student Ministry staff praying for WBS. There's something that happens when God's people pray together; a bond is formed and a sense of partnership is nurtured.

Fearless Witness

Let's pick up the next stone. The next stone is fearless witness. We saw at the start of v. 19 Paul asked for prayer for himself. Look what he asks them to pray.

Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should (verses 19–20).

I love Paul's humility. This guy had been all over the Roman empire sharing Christ. He'd stood before Felix and Agrippa and not given an inch. Five different times he'd received 39 lashes. That means he had the scars on his back from a total of 195 lashes. He'd never compromise his witness to stay safe. And yet, he says, pray for me. I can't do it without your prayers.

He asks they pray that when he speaks he'd speak "fearlessly." He uses that word twice. The word means freedom to speak without restraint. It can refer to both courage and clarity. John Stott says, "Clarity without courage is like sunshine in the desert: plenty of light but nothing worth looking at. Courage without clarity is like a beautiful landscape at night time: plenty to see, but no light by which to enjoy it. What is needed...today is a combination of clarity and courage..."

One of the things that strikes me about this is he doesn't ask for his release from prison; he doesn't ask he be set free from his chains, but that his mouth would be set free from fear. He wants the gospel to spread freely and if that means he stays locked in a Roman dungeon, that's okay. Sometimes we ask for the wrong things. Our minds are set on our own circumstances and we fail to see God may want to use the very circumstances we want out of. The very things that confine us may be the very things that God uses.

He calls himself an "*ambassador in chains.*" That's almost like an oxymoron. An ambassador is a prestigious position; an accredited representative. But to be in chains contradicts the honor of such a role. It would have been an insult to both the sender and the sent. But Paul is an ambassador on behalf of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself was no stranger to insults and suffering. So even if he stays in chains, Paul wants to be fearless in "*making known the mystery of the gospel.*"

Many of us today find it hard to speak with courage and clarity about Jesus in a world that often seems hostile to him. Some of are afraid of being categorized as narrow, bigoted and even ignorant. We feel stripped of our voice. Our chains are the chains of fear. We need to understand that a lot is at stake. Souls are at stake. Remember this stone is used in the context of spiritual warfare. We need the courage to stand and share the gospel. Think of your own story. How did you get here? Who took a risk with you? Who told you about Jesus? Who invited you to that meeting? It changed your life. Aren't you glad they did?

Faithful Friendship

Let's pick up another stone. This is the stone of faithful friendship. Look at verses 21–22.

Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you

may know how we are, and that he may encourage you.

Paul speaks of Tychicus. He was a native of the province of Asia and may have been from Ephesus. No doubt they at least knew him. Tychicus was one of those men who stuck by Paul's side through much of Paul's ministry. He was with Paul when he was arrested in Jerusalem and he stayed with him as he was brought to Rome under house arrest. Paul was likely dictating this letter to Tychicus who would then bring this letter to the Ephesians. He'd also bring news of Paul's welfare to them and hopefully offer some encouragement.

Paul calls him a "*dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord.*" What a wonderful endorsement. In it we see affection and respect. Paul wasn't a lone ranger. He had friends, close friends; people he depended on; people he needed. He understood that we don't go into battle alone. We go in community. We pray in community. We bear witness in community. How about you?

According to a 2006 study, our circle of close friends is getting smaller. Over the past 20 years, the number of people we can discuss "matters important to us" dropped nearly a third, from a mean of 2.94 to 2.08. The number of people who said they had no one to talk to about important matters more than doubled, to nearly 25 percent.

A 2012 *New York Times* article added that this scarcity of close friends has especially impacted mid-lifers. During mid-life it's harder to meet the three conditions required for making new friends—proximity, repeated connections, and a setting that encourages people to let their guard down and confide in each other. The article said in your 30s and 40s plenty of new people enter your life, through work, children, and even Facebook. But actual close friends—the kind you make in college, the kind you call in a crisis—those are in shorter supply. As people approach mid-life, the days of youthful exploration, when life felt like one big blind date, are fading. Schedules compress, priorities change, and people often become pickier in what they want in their friends.

Is that true for you? Who would you call your dear brother/sister and faithful servant of the Lord? This is why we emphasize you being intentional about being in some kind of small group here at CPC. You can't develop these kinds of relationships by coming here once a week. You need proximity; repeated connections; and a setting that encourages people to let their guard down and confide in each other.

Generous Benedictions

Let's go to the fourth stone. I'll call this generous benedictions. It was customary back then for people to end their letters with good wishes. Like "I wish good health and long life for you and your family." We do the same thing at times. Paul saw no reason

to break completely from this tradition, but he Christianizes it. What he writes is more like a wish-prayer. Look what he says.

Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love (verses 23–24).

There's nothing more revealing about us than what we wish for those we love the most. Be honest with yourself, what do you wish for your children, your spouse or your closest friends? Education? Success? Prosperity? Health? These are all good things, but they're not what Paul wishes for his friends in Ephesus. He wishes for three things: peace, love with faith, and grace. All of these are gifts or blessings that come from *"God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* All of these gifts have been described in rich detail earlier in this letter.

"Peace to the brothers and sisters." Here in Ephesians Paul has told us Jesus is our peace because he's broken down the dividing wall separating us from God and from one another and he's created one new race of humanity (2:14–17). Because of that he called those within the body of Christ *"to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (4:3).

"Love with faith." What an interesting couplet. We'd normally put peace and love together, not love with faith. I think the correct way to understand this is to hear Paul saying, "Listen, I know you have faith in Jesus and that's a good thing. You understand the importance of what you believe. But here's what I want you to do: I want you to add love to that. I want your faith to be seen and even proven in acts of love." Right here in this letter Paul has said, *"bear with one another in love"* (4:2), *"speak the truth to one another in love"* (4:15) and *"walk in love just as Christ loved us"* (5:2).

"Grace." This is the last benediction. Grace is God's unmerited gift of forgiveness, new life and salvation through his Son. You can't earn any of these things. They're received by faith by those who ask. We learned in this letter, *"...by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the*

gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (2:8–9). And we've learned from the beginning of time it was God's purpose to show off his grace. Paul says he did all this *"in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus"* (2:7).

How could we possibly go into battle without this stone of generous benediction where we find peace, love with faith, and grace?

Undying Love

But there's still one more stone. What do you think it is? As I read this passage I couldn't help notice to **who** he sends these blessings to. He sends them to *"all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love."* The last stone is very simply our love for Jesus. Of course, our love for him arises only because of his grace. Our love for him grows as we understand how he's lavished all of these blessings on us: peace, love, faith and grace. "We love because he first loved us."

So as we come to the close of this letter and consider all the vast riches of his grace, I would ask you, Do you love him with an undying love? You might say, "Well, I believe in him." Or you might even say, "I try to obey him." But do you love him? Do you delight in him? Is he dear to you? Is your passion for him alive and growing? Do you love him more than when you first met him? It's so unfortunate that years later Jesus would write a letter to this same church, the church at Ephesus, and he would say, *"I know your deeds. I know your commitment to sound teaching. I know your willingness even to suffer for me. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love"* (Rev. 2:2–4). So let's not leave this stone out! As we take communion this morning, thank him for what he's given you and just tell him how much you love him.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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