

July 19, 2026

Paul Purdue preaching

In January of 2001, I ran the Disney Marathon, the flattest marathon in the country. I try to mention that whenever I can. My cousin Tom and I clasped our hands as we crossed the finish line together. Perhaps, because the universe is not always fair, I finished a thousandth of a second ahead. A Few months later Tom ran a marathon an hour faster without needing to drag this refrigerator along with him.

That spring my hands, shoulders, hips, knees and feet started to swell and ache with undiagnosed rheumatoid arthritis. One morning, as it took 15 minutes to put on my shoes, I looked at the boy's toys scattered about the room and was overwhelmed with uncertainty and grief.

Twenty years later, I stood before a class of first year Vanderbilt medical residents recounting that story. I shared how Connie insisted on coming to my first Rheumatology exam, bringing our rambunctious preschoolers, who were all over that exam room. Dr Susan Kroop did not have an immediate diagnosis, just some next steps. Somehow I went home with a glimmer of hope.

When we got to the questions, a young doctor in a hijab asked *"Pastor, what is the role of faith and prayer in your health journey?"* Her question stirred questions in me. I answered, *"I'm pretty sure I have never asked God to heal my RA. I have prayed for strength, peace, and maybe pain relief, but not a cure. I am not sure what that says about my faith."* I continued *"I understand in Islam the word for prayer means something like 'recite or remember' and my prayers have helped ground me in what is beautiful, what matters, and what I need to do."* Friends, there are plenty of TV preachers peddling Bible verses like: *"ask and you will receive"*, *"do not doubt"*, *"the prayer of faith will save the sick"* and *"God makes all things work for good"*. (Matthew 7, Romans 8, James 5) But Jesus also taught, *"God knows what you need before you ask... Seek first God's Kin-dom"* (Matthew 6)

Over the last 25 years, I have lost things I loved. I have not run a mile, water skied, or played serious basketball. However, I have hiked to the bottom of the grand canyon (and back out) and swam over 1,000 miles 60 laps at a time. I have hobbled around soccer fields, basketball courts, and baseball diamonds coaching my young children. I turn 60 tomorrow. I am deeply blessed and so thankful for my life, all of it, for rheumatologists, orthopedic surgeons, pharmacists, researchers, chemists, bio-medical engineers (who designed my fancy artificial hip), professors, PT's and health

insurance. Why did I get RA? What would my life look like without RA? Who knows? My prayers have not held those answers, but my faith has helped me live.

In The Wounds Are the Witness, Dean Yolanda Pierce writes that *“there is a difference between healing and curing... (of) disease, sickness, or sorrow.... We want a cure: for the agent of destruction to be completely taken away and to be left without any disease.....And while God can and does cure, healing is a different matter. Healing means that the injury and the trauma remain present, but we learn to live in wholeness despite that fact.... Healing is a way of living in the world, taking small steps toward wholeness and peace... Healing is finding a space of joy and laughter even in grief. Healing is a decision to get up and try again. Healing is coming to the conclusion that God sees me, believes in me, and walks with me.”*

We know life holds a share of disappointments, dysregulation, evil, injustice, oppression, sickness, setbacks and suffering. The Psalms remind me there will be deep valleys, shadowy trails and even circling bulls, perhaps this is why so many of us find comfort and hope in these ancient prayers. The Psalm's prayerful longing held our spiritual ancestors together as they struggled through generational trauma, war, exile, upheaval, sickness and death. The Psalms open all the range of human feelings to God, awakening our souls to God, God's will, other's needs and our own inner condition.

Most of life's storms are not solved by the red sea parting or someone walking on the water. Jesus prayed all night, longing, asking, weeping and yet the unwanted cup did not go away. Jacob wrestled all night with God walking away with a limp, a new name, and an unpredictable reunion with Esau the next morning. Jesus often withdrew to the quiet places to pray, returning without a miracle.() Prayer is more than a spiritual transaction, it opens the soul to God, ourselves and life.

When we learn to pray from the depths of our soul, to wait for the Lord, to get real with God, something mysterious, holy and healing slowly unwinds within us.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered! (That mercy is what makes you God, God!)

*I wait for the Lord; my soul waits,
 and in God's word I hope;
 my soul waits for the Lord
 more than those who watch for the morning,
 more than those who watch for the morning.
 O People, hope in the Lord!
 For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
 and with God is great power to redeem.*

Psalm 130 invites us into prayerful longing: longing to be present with God. It is not a quick request expecting an immediate answer or any answer at all. It does not ask for something except to be present with God. *"I wait for the Lord... my soul waits for the Lord, more than those who watch for the morning."* Yes, there are moments when we must ask and plead, but could our expectations of quick answers, miracles, or righteous interventions keep us from the deeper healing of dwelling with God? In Luke 6, Jesus says *"love, do good, and give, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for God himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."* Perhaps praying without expectation of a reward allows prayer to shape us into the children of God? *My soul waits for God, for with the Lord there is steadfast love and power to redeem, I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, watching..."*

Romans 8 is a beloved chapter filled with comforting hopeful promises.

*Therefore there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
 Jesus has set you free.
 We are children of God,
 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God
 God is for us
 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,
 nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,
 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation
 will be able to separate us from the love of God
 in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

What might surprise us is how the Apostle Paul weaves the promises into a tapestry of suffering, groaning, labor pains, waiting, watching, pushing, longing.

*Consider the sufferings of this present time... (this is not just rhetorical)
 Creation waits with eager longing*

*Creation is groaning together
as it suffers the pains of labor,
and not only the Creation,
but we groan inwardly while we wait .*

There is more to come, but we are groaning, pushing, laboring. Paul knots together seemingly illfitting threads “*Nothing can separate us from the Love of God*” and “*we are groaning inwardly along with the whole creation*” Nothing can separate us, not even the reality of our suffering. Our suffering, our groaning, and our longing is not contrary to faith, indeed it may be the deeper end of faith and healing. We have so cheapened prayer, turning it into a transaction. Know this, if you are suffering, laboring, and longing you are in good company, Paul says we all suffer, groan, labor and yet nothing separating us from the love of God.

But hear even better Good News...

*“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness,
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,*

- I love Paul sharing that: “*we do not know how to pray.*” Somehow, we have not yet put that into a confession of faith. “Lord, we pray ... remembering we do not know how to pray

*but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words.
And God, who searches our hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”*

We are inwardly groaning
The universe is groaning with us
Almighty God is groaning, suffering with us

I did not know how to pray when it took me 15 minutes to tie my shoes. Hear the Good News, the God of the universe was weeping with me. God is taking our raw, unwashed, unfiltered, sometimes unholy prayers and loving us “*with groanings too deep for words*”. Who can condemn us? No one! God is for us, not against us. God is not judging our wounds or despair, but is present with us with groans, sighs and tears. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, nothing.

How do we pray when the world or our world seems to spin out of control?

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

*If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
I wait for the Lord; my soul waits,
and in God's word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
Hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with God is great power to redeem. Amen*