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Traveling Mercies

Scripture: James 4:13–16

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“Please pray for traveling mercies as we go to . . .”

I don't eat a lot of sushi, but when I do, one of the ingredients is usually imitation crab. To me, “traveling mercies” is imitation crab in Christian lingo. The phrase communicates something, but it's a cheap substitute for biblical truth.

A Little History

The phrase “traveling mercies” goes back at least as far as the late nineteenth century when travel was far more perilous than today. Letters from missionaries report that the Lord provided traveling mercies as they traveled to their ministry destination.

The earliest known use in a context outside of missions appears in the 1956 book *They Shall Not March Alone*. There, a chaplain prayed for traveling mercies on behalf of a soldier.

Because new phrases in a language take root verbally before they appear in print, it is impossible to know precisely where and how the phrase originated.

What Does It Mean?

So what do people mean when they ask for traveling mercies? To state the obvious, they're asking for safe, smooth, problem-free travel. It's a short way of asking that there be no traffic on the way to the airport, that no one be chosen for special screening, and that the airplane fly its proper path and arrive at its destination at the appointed time.

Above all, it's a request that no one get injured, that no accidents of any kind occur, and that everyone remain in full health.

But it's difficult to remember all the different elements, so to ensure full protection, we simply pray for traveling mercies.

Fundamentally, there is nothing inherently wrong with such a request. Indeed, it would be wicked to *desire* an accident, illness, and death while traveling. But just because something isn't inherently wrong, does that mean we *should* ask for it? In other words, could there be clear reasons why praying for traveling mercies may not be appropriate?

Biblical Examples

Despite the extensive traveling conducted by the apostles, they rarely made requests—by letter—regarding travel. Paul asked Titus to “diligently help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way so that nothing is lacking for them” (Titus 3:13). To the Romans he wrote, “I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped by you on my journey there by you” (Romans 15:24, ESV).

But in his requests for prayer, Paul never asked that believers pray for his *safety*. Some might say that traveling mercies are consistent with what the apostle John wrote: “I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers” (3 John 2). But John was writing to a stationary church, not someone about to travel. ([Click here for more on this passage](#))

Perhaps most helpful is what James wrote regarding travel plans.

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.” But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. (James 4:13-16)

Rather than encouraging prayer for safety, James emphasizes that our plans must be kept tentative due to the uncertainty and brevity of life.

Biblical Priorities in Prayer

The most significant concern regarding praying for traveling mercies is that it can indicate a lack of biblical priorities. What are those priorities?

Growth in Christ. At the beginning of Paul’s letter to the church in Colosse, Paul wrote:

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy. (Colossians 1:9-11, ESV)

When all goes well in life, our nature tends to become self-reliant. We’re not as quick to depend on the Lord when everything goes according to plan. As a result, the Lord often uses interruptions in our lives to remind us that we are dependent on Him. We do, in fact, need His strength for endurance and patience. Because we cannot account for every possibility, we need His wisdom and understanding to respond to life’s twists and turns. As James writes, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God” (James 1:5).

Elsewhere Paul wrote, “We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God” (Romans 8:28). As the context makes clear, the good toward which all things works is our conformity to Christ. The broader context is about suffering and God’s purposes in it. Therefore,

while we should not be masochists and desire suffering, we must remember that trials and difficulties serve a divine purpose.

Desiring God's will, not ours. Proverbs reminds us that “the mind of a man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps” (Proverbs 16:9). We usually make our plans, set our itineraries, and move ahead without significant thought that our plans might not correspond to God's plans.

When we pray for traveling mercies, are we thinking more about our plans or His? It's not that the two are always mutually exclusive, but what about when they are? Before or after we ask for traveling mercies, do we also pray that His will be done?

Gospel opportunities. Closing his letter to the church in Colosse, Paul wrote, “Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison” (Colossians 4:3, ESV). Granted, Paul is not speaking of travel—he is in prison, after all—but there is a principle we can glean here.

Unexpected difficulties often provide unique opportunities for the gospel. It may be a missed flight that leads to conversation with a stranger. It may be an injury that leads to interaction with medical professionals. Often grieving over sudden loss can make survivors open to eternal realities.

Usually, when our travel plans go smoothly we're less aware of opportunities to interact with strangers. But unexpected delays and unforeseen difficulties can distract us from our itinerary and help us notice the people the Lord has placed around us.

Paul offers this perspective when he writes about the benefit of being in prison.

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else. (Philippians 1:12-13)

The Lord may well use travel disruptions or even tragedies to bring you in contact with people who otherwise would never hear the gospel.

A Better Way

As with prayer for healing, there is nothing wrong with praying for safety. But even more important than healing and safety are God's plans and purposes. One danger in praying for traveling mercies is that it can become a casual request that prevents us from thinking carefully about other priorities.

It's both amazing and true that the Holy Spirit has told us how we can guarantee that our prayers be answered. The apostle John writes,

This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him. (1 John 5:14-15)

When we pray for traveling mercies there is no guarantee that the Lord will hear and answer our prayer. But when we pray according to His will and His priorities, we can be certain that He will indeed hear and positively answer our requests.

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