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[series: #1 When God's People Pray]

Prayer's Promise

Psalm 34

Do you pray? If so, how much and how often? I ask you that not to make you feel guilty but to see if you're getting as much out of your relationship with Christ as you can. Imagine, for example, that you were to give me a blank check on my birthday and tell me to spend as much as I want up to... let's say \$50,000. But a week, a month, and finally a year goes by and you notice I haven't cashed it. What would you think? I ask that because, as we're going to see this morning and in the weeks ahead, Jesus made us some absolutely amazing promises like John 14:13, John 15:16, and John 16:23. Three times in three chapters, He makes the same amazing promise: "Truly, truly I say to you whatever you ask in my name that I will do that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it." That's what you call a blank check. But what has to grieve Him is how seldom we take advantage of it. According to one survey, the average American Christian spends just 3 minutes in prayer a day. Nor do pastors do much better. The same survey indicates that pastors spend just 7 minutes in prayer a day, which may explain why we don't see more miraculous things happening in answer to our prayers. You see, when we fail to pray, we get what man can do in response to the needs of the day. But when we pray, we get what God can do, and that's often far more than we can ask or even think. So why don't we pray more?

One reason is because we already have our basic needs met, and we're embarrassed to ask Him for our wants. The other reason people often give is busyness, they're so busy they don't have time to pray as they want. But then that can't be true because if you and I truly believed that we could ask God for anything we want and He would give it to us, we'd find time to pray, wouldn't we? No, the more likely reason we fail to pray more than we do is because we've tried it before and things didn't turn out the way we hoped, so we gradually stopped praying. And I don't want you to raise your hand, but isn't that why you don't pray more than you do? I thought about that a few weeks ago at a Crosby, Stills, and Nash concert Cheryl and I went to. We used to listen to them as teenagers, and we thought it'd be fun to hear them in person 40 years later. And the music was great, but you know what stood out to both of us The fact that these millionaire superstars are still protesting 40 years later! They're unhappy about the war in Afghanistan. They're unhappy about our country's energy policies. But their biggest beef of all is with organized religion and how hypocritical this is! And I thought, "This is interesting. Here you guys have everything you could ask for in life and you still aren't happy campers!" In fact, it reminded me of Romans 1:21 where Paul tells us why God is going to judge the world for its sins, and the one overriding reason is in verse 21. He says: "For although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were they thankful."

Let me ask you. How thankful are you this morning and are you demonstrating it by calling on the name of the Lord in prayer? This morning and the next several weeks, we're going to be looking at one of the spiritual disciplines that Jesus has called us to incorporate into our lives. You'll remember I mentioned several weeks ago that that's the commitment the leadership of our church has made for the years to come—to be a church where we no longer promote one special event or passing fancy after another in hopes of attracting a bigger attendance, but one that's committed to doing what Jesus commanded us to do, and that's to produce fully devoted followers of Christ who are committed to growing in worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and outreach—the first and most important of which is a life of worship and prayer. Jesus said, “The time is coming and is now here when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.” In fact, did you know that's the way the Bible describes the first people to worship God? It comes right after Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden and their son Cain kills his brother Abel. The Bible says God graciously gave them a second son in Abel's place, named Seth, and it says the difference between his children and Cain's children was this. It says of Seth's children, “Then men began to call upon the name of the Lord.” That's the first sign of faith and that you're a born-again child of God. You call upon the name of the Lord in prayer. Jim Cymbala, pastor of Brooklyn Tabernacle, writes: “The essence of all religion is people not only trusting God but trusting Him enough to call on His name in prayer so they actually experience His gracious provision in their lives.”

By the way, speaking of Jim Cymbala and prayer, one of the best studies our small group has ever done is the DVD study based on Jim Cymbala's book, When God's People Pray. So if you're looking to strengthen your prayer life or you'd like to do a great summer study with your small group, write a note on your registration card and we'll help you get the materials. Or if your life group wants to do a follow-up study on prayer in the fall, this is the study I'd recommend. But enough of the advertisements! Now it's time for our study, and the place I want to turn is to one of the great psalms of David where he tells us how prayer changed his life. The psalms, as you may know, are the ancient hymnbook of the Jewish people, describing the emotional journey they went through as they walked with God. So that's how we want to study them, not didactically like one of the doctrinal sections out of the NT, but as songs expressing the innermost thoughts of our hearts. It's Psalm 34 if you turn there in your Bible please, where David begins with a chorus of praise, but then he stops to explain why he loves the Lord, promising that we can have the same experience ourselves. So that's where I want to begin—

1. Praise

Listen as I read verses 1 to 3. David sings: “I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; the humble will hear it and rejoice. Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!” How many of you have read the Purpose Driven Life? Then tell me. Do you remember how it begins? The very first sentence is: “It's not about you!” And the reason it spoke to our culture is because we're a me-driven generation where we assume it's all about us. In fact, we're so me-centered that we think questions like this are profound. You've heard this one, haven't you? If a tree falls in the woods and there's no one there to hear it, does it still make a sound?” Of course it does because even if we aren't there to hear it, God is! He's the reason the tree, the forest, and all of its creatures exist! Revelation 4:11—“You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power, for you have created all things and

for your pleasure they are and were created.” That’s the reason David wrote this Psalm, to remind us that we don’t live for ourselves either! We were created to bless the Lord at all times and to exalt His name together.

That’s also how every true prayer begins! We pray not to get our will done in heaven, but to get His will done on earth. Jesus taught us to pray like this: “Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” which is also the reason He could make the promise He did: “Whatever you ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” God’s glory, not our pleasure, is why you and I were created, and that’s also why we can be confident when we pray with His glory in mind because when we pray like that, we’re praying with the same purpose as the rest of creation, for His glory, not ours. And that isn’t hard to do, David reminds us, because if we truly love Him, His praise will continually be in our mouth. Is that true of you? You know one of the words that’s lost much of its meaning today is the word “believe,” because I don’t know if you have noticed it, but almost everyone in our culture is quick to say they believe if you ask them. Ask an alcoholic on the street, a man who’s left his wife for a younger woman, the business person cheating on her taxes, or a couple living together outside of marriage—ask them if they believe in Jesus and chances are they’ll say yes, even though they’re violating everything He taught. Everyone believes in Jesus, and yet it was Jesus who said, “Enter by the narrow gate for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter by it; but small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life and few there be who find it.” So I think a better question to ask instead of do you believe is: Do you love Jesus and is His praise continually in your mouth?

C. S. Lewis gives the best explanation of praise read in his book Reflections on the Psalms. He says before he met Christ, he had the idea that God craves our worship like a vain woman fishing for compliments. But then he adds, “The most obvious fact about praise escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliments or the giving of honor. I never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows in praise. The world rings with praise—lovers praising their partners, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players their favorite game.” What he failed to understand is that God is our ultimate source of our joy and we praise Him not because we have to, but to raise our joy to its highest level. He concludes, “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not only expresses, but actually completes the enjoyment; praise is its appointed consummation.”

So we bless the Lord at all times. His praise continually fills our mouths. But why, what is it about Him that makes us love and praise Him? David says it’s His faithfulness to His promises, the most important of which is His faithfulness in answering prayer. And the reason I say that’s most important, 31 centuries later now, is because of the promise breaking culture in which you and I live.

2. Promise

Politicians promise, “If you vote for me and my agenda for our country, our state, or our local community (which usually includes an increase in spending and taxes to go with it), it’ll stimulate the economy, create new jobs, and happy days are here again! Let me ask you. How’s that working for us? Couples vow to love each other for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health till death do us part, only to give up and throw in the towel when the going gets tough. The

result is a young adult population which is now more cynical and slower to marry than any generation before them! The average age for men is now 27 and the average age for women is 25. And that's not without an impact on their ability to trust in God. "After all," they worry, "if I can't depend on my dad whom I've seen to be a promise keeper, then how do I trust my Heavenly Father whom I've never seen to be faithful to me?" That's how David must have felt as he sat down to write this song. Do you remember the back story behind it? Notice what it says in the introduction: "A psalm of David when he pretended madness before Abimelech who drove him away and he left."

David was the youngest of 8 boys and thus never got much recognition at home. You'll remember when the Holy Spirit sent Samuel the prophet to Jesse's home to anoint the new king of Israel, Jesse brought each one of his sons before him, sure that it must be one of his older boys God wanted, but God rejected them all, so that Samuel finally asks, "Don't you have any other sons?" Jesse answers almost as an afterthought, "Well, there is my youngest son but he's out tending the sheep." But that's who God chooses to be the new king of Israel! Not long after that, David slips away from the sheep to deliver supplies to his brothers on the battlefield only to discover a Philistine giant mocking the armies of Israel and the God of heaven. So he asks them what's happening, and how does his brother Eliab respond? He says, "What are you doing here and with whom did you leave the sheep in the desert? I know how wicked your heart is. You only came down here to watch the battle!" Not much encouragement at home and now, even though he's been anointed king, he isn't able to take the throne right away. He has to wait over 15 years! Did you know that—that God's good plan for your life may require a lot of waiting before the blessing? David has to wait for Saul to die to become king and what does Saul spend his time doing until then? Trying to kill him because Saul likes being king and doesn't want to give up that power and control! So David flees his homeland and seeks refuge with their enemy but they don't trust him either. 1 Samuel 21: "But the servants of Achish said to him, "Isn't this David, the king of the land? Isn't he the one they sing about in their dances: Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousands? David took these words to heart and was afraid of Achish (Abimelech) king of Gath. So he pretended to be insane in their presence; and while he was in their hands he acted like a madman, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard."

This wasn't what you'd call a great faith-building experience for David. Or was it? David had nowhere to turn for comfort and support but God Himself, and it was then, when we have nowhere to turn but God that we discover that God is not only enough, He's the only Source of true contentment and joy, which is why He also lets us suffer hardship and heartache at times—to drive us into a corner where discover that He's the Friend who sticks closer than a brother! Listen to how David's faith goes skyrocketing when he remembers how God answered his prayers. Verse 4: "I sought the Lord and He heard me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to Him are radiant and their faces will never be ashamed. This poor man cried and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles." Then he invites us: "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and He delivers them. Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!" And the lesson is this: We're all David! Life doesn't turn out the way we think it should, but then our mind clears and we realize how unfaithful we've been in disappointment and we say to ourselves: Who was I to think I deserved that anyway, because like David, we all sin and fall far short of the glory of God. David was both an adulterer and a murderer,

you remember, and yet the Bible says of him, “He was a man after God’s own heart,” because in spite of his sin, he loved the glory of God more than any other single thing in his life. So trust in the Lord and pray in spite of your doubts and your sins because it isn’t about you and your great faith and faithfulness, it’s about His great glory and grace.

Do you know the story of Jim Cymbala and Brooklyn Tabernacle? It was a hopeless situation when he and his wife Carol took over the ministry in 1972. The church had 15 people and was located in a neighborhood populated by prostitutes, drug addicts and broken people from every cultural background, and Cymbala had no experience, ministerial training, or money to keep the ministry alive.

So what did he do? The same thing I want us to do in the years ahead—to become a house of prayer that brings glory to God by relying on Him, not our own wisdom and abilities, as the sole source of our power and protection and provision as a people, for what happened when Brooklyn Tabernacle made that commitment?

38 years later, they are now one of the greatest life-changing churches in the world with a gospel choir of 285 voices, thousands at their Tuesday night prayer services, 10,000 members redeemed from every type of brokenness by the blood of Christ, and a neighborhood radically transformed through their influence.

Why the difference? Pastor Cymbala writes: “The Lord cherishes his people and loves to answer their prayers. When others see these unmistakable blessings, they recognize God’s goodness and declare, ‘Look what the Lord has done!’”

This was God’s promise through Jeremiah: “Thus says the LORD who made the earth, the LORD who formed it to establish it, the Lord is His name: ‘Call to me and I will answer you and show you great and mighty things you do not know.’”

And if all of this isn’t enough to get you praying, consider two more reasons before we move on—one Biblical and one very personal and practical. The Biblical proof is verse 20 which is a prophetic passage of Scripture. Did you know this? David writes, “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken.” This was a prediction made over a thousand years before the birth of Christ, but the Apostle John says it was perfectly fulfilled in the death of God’s Son. “Because the Jews did not want their bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have their legs broken and their bodies taken down. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. These things happened that the scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” My point is this: If God can so perfectly predict and plan the protection of His Son’s bones over 1,000 years before His death, He’ll have no trouble answering your prayers when you call upon Him in faith. And the second, even more encouraging thing I want you to hear in just a moment is a faith story from one of our own people. But before we do I want to answer an objection that could be raised this point: I’ve prayed many times, but I still get no answer. So can you say God is faithful to His promises when He hasn’t been faithful to me? And I don’t pretend to understand all the circumstances of your life or that there’s an easy answer to your question, but this I must remind you before we finish, and that’s that this isn’t a promise without preconditions.

3. Preconditions

We already learned at the outset what the greatest motivating factor is when it comes to prayer. It's praying for the glory of God. So I don't plan to say anymore about that now. What I want to emphasize is the second condition for answered prayer in verse 9. David continues: "Fear the Lord you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days." Then he clarifies what it looks like if we fear the Lord. He adds: "Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth." So what does David mean by the fear of the Lord? I think he means just that, that we need to be fear-struck when we realize who He is—He's the Great "I Am" who had no beginning and created everything there is for His own holy pleasure and purposes—and we need to be afraid of what will happen to us if we fail to approach Him with the reverence He deserves.

One example is the Grand Canyon. Do you know how long the average tourist spends looking at the Grand Canyon during a typical visit? 3½ minutes! That's sad because if you and I need anything today, it's more time alone marveling at God's creation, pondering His greatness, and letting it fill us with a holy fear of His majesty because that's what keeps us safe. Fear keeps us from venturing too near the edge of the Grand Canyon, so that we marvel at its grandeur from a safe distance.

And the same is true of God! We fear Him, so that we don't need to fear Him, letting His majesty strike fear in our hearts at the thought of worshipping any false god or savior, of which there are many in our culture today, seeking first His kingdom and righteousness, so that we get every blessing He has for us.

Because that's what we need and want! I finish with this comment from Jim Cymbala, who writes: "The blessing of God is something very real and tangible. It can change a man's life, transform a neighborhood, invigorate a church, and even alter the course of history." Let's make that our purpose and prayer as we close.

Conclusion

While I'm praying, do me a favor and ask yourself these 3 key questions about your prayer life and relationship with Christ. 1) To what extent do you feel drawn to God seeking Him in prayer and expecting His blessing? 2) To what extent have you faced your trials on your own without God's help, and what's been the result? 3) To what extent do you feel confident that God will keep His promises to you and meet your needs when you call on Him? Pray with me, please—