

Prayer

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Date: 18 September 2017

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[0:00] What is your reaction to this idea of a week of prayer? And I would quite expect in any general gathering that it could range from excitement to curiosity to puzzlement to just plain bored or indifferent.

! Why would we spend a week in prayer? Of course, we're not really spending it 24-7, but we are going to spend a lot of time. And some people would say, that's not really a very good use and productive use of time.

Well, we beg to differ. We think this is actually at the very heart. Someone said that the prayer meeting is the engine room of the church.

And the day we stop praying is the day we stop being a proper church of Jesus Christ. But we need encouragement in our prayer.

It's really interesting to see in the New Testament how frequently the exhortation is not to scold people for prayerlessness, but to encourage them to prayer.

[1:11] Because there are all kinds of difficulties, obstructions to praying. And so the Lord Jesus Christ, in particular in his stories about the subject of prayer, is very encouraging.

Wants people to be praying. Just takes us by the hand and encourages us to be prayerful people.

This morning we looked at Jesus being our best teacher in prayer.

And how striking it is that in the gospel record, as we know, Jesus was a frequent prayer. Of course, he spent a lot of time with his father.

But it's interesting to see the way in which the gospel record is quite selective in giving us examples of the prayer life of Jesus Christ.

And we believe that is because he would cause us to learn from the example of Jesus.

[2:19] So that we can take all these different gospel record examples and learn something of the nature of prayer. Not just for Jesus, but for ourselves, because we are brothers with Jesus Christ by grace.

And we are brought into the family of God. So we find him praising God. We find him agonizing over God's will for him. We find him asking God's forgiveness for those who are putting him to death and committing himself to God at the moment of his death.

And these are sort of recorded there in the scriptures. Not just so that we might admire our Savior, but also as a pattern for us in our living.

And to make sure that there is no part of our life which is absent from the target of prayer. But I'm raising a couple of objections tonight.

And in particular, this first one here, I'm not Jesus. You might say, well, it's all fine for you. You've presented this picture of Jesus, but I'm not Jesus.

[3:32] And therefore, can I really learn from his example? In particular, what right have I come? Have I to come near to God and be heard? We don't have a problem with the idea that Jesus had a right to come to his own Father and be heard.

But we certainly have a problem in our minds with the idea that we can come near to God. Why should God listen to me? This is the problem of our sin and our status before God.

And don't let any of us think that this is just something that we sort of bury the day we become a Christian. This is something which the enemy of our souls keeps reviving within us to prevent us coming close to our Heavenly Father.

And how can I know what prayers God will answer? Experience teaches us that God does not say yes to all the things we pray for. So what should we pray for?

This is the problem of our ignorance of God's specific will for us. And as we come to the week of prayer, it's important that we are able to understand and face up to and address these two points. [4:47] Our enemy will seek to discourage and dishearten us about this week. He can accuse us about how pathetic and ineffectual our praying is.

So that we hardly have the energy and desire to get started. And it may be in your mind you're looking at your diary and thinking, I can make Tuesday morning or I can maybe come on Thursday evening.

But what can I contribute? And as we start our praying, and we probably won't be a very big number of people.

It's easy for us to be discouraged by the fewness of the numbers and just that sense that we come here rather cold. Especially if you're coming here after a day at work, you'll probably feel yourself to be spiritually a bit cold.

And that's when we're very vulnerable to the accusations of the enemy. He will accuse and discourage us and we can so easily listen to him. So we can restrain from prayer because we don't think we're worthy.

[6:01] We don't have anything worthwhile to open our mouths about and to bring to God. So we do need to heed the specific encouragements of God's word on these points.

Don't even start to address the devil. Don't even start to address the devil on any other basis than what the word of God has to say. It's a complete trap and a lie if we were to go down the route of saying, Well, I had a good time in prayer last week, therefore it'll be okay this week.

God's word never encourages us to come before him on the basis of our last experience of prayer. Rather, the encouragements have to do with the great things which are true because of his word and his ways.

And in complete contrast to the enemy who discourages us, God never discourages us in the matter of prayer. His word is there to encourage and reassure us.

So tonight, I wanted to go on to two more points about how we could learn from Jesus and be encouraged by Jesus and see his help for us.

[7:15] And the first is, Jesus prays for us. How can we come near to God? That's the problem, isn't it? How can we come near to God? The first passage is on the screen now.

In John chapter 17, verse 20, this long prayer of Jesus, he says, My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.

It's a thrilling moment, isn't it? When 2,000 years are sort of wiped away and we just feel this thought.

Jesus was remembering us on the night before the crucifixion. Jesus was remembering us. He had us in mind on the night before he was crucified for our sin.

Amazing thought. Well, that is Jesus on earth bringing his prayers to his father on behalf of all his people.

[8:35] And then we turn to Hebrews chapter 4, 14 to 16. I've got it up on the screen again. Let me just read this to you.

It's wonderful. Set of verses. Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, or sometimes the translation is who's gone into heaven.

Jesus, the son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are.

It was without sin. I'm just going to pause that reading at that point to say, we are reminded, as in so much of Hebrews, to look back to the pictures of the Old Testament times and to consider Jesus in the way of the high priest and think tonight, this high priest, how does he come into the presence of God, into the holy of holies, that holy place.

Only once a year is that permitted, and that can only be by blood sacrifice. And it's an awesome thing for him to go into that holy place, to a holy God who would burn up anything which is ungodly.

[10:08] And the people wait to see whether he will emerge from that moment, because they're outside. And when he does re-emerge, they do so with relief.

But it's a passing over of sin. It's not a thorough dealing with it. It's just a temporary stopgap, a sort of plug. And there has to be another occasion and another occasion when he's making propitiation for the people on the basis of the blood.

We have a great high priest who's gone into heaven. He's gone into the very presence of the holy God. And we have one who is not like the high priest, who wasn't able to properly sympathize with weakness, but one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, but managed to do all that without sin, unlike any high priest who had ever been born.

What do we bring? What do we bring to the peace? We bring, according to this verse, we bring weakness, we bring temptation, we bring sin, we bring need.

But Jesus brings strength, he brings temptation overcome, sinless obedience, and utter sufficiency. And as we trust Jesus, he is pleased to act as our perfect representative and substitute so that we are not rejected, but accepted, not turned away, but welcomed and embraced.

[12:02] And the Father's full and merciful attention is devoted to us. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy, find grace to help us in our time of need.

So the devil might whisper to us and our own hearts would tell us, is this always true?

This is guaranteed. Is this always going to be the case? We say yes, because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood, therefore he's able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives to intercede for them.

Hallelujah. What a grand encouragement, brothers and sisters, all this is for us tonight. We can come to this great God on the basis of the loving, gracious work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We need the comfort and reassurance of these truths as we come to God in prayer. And it would be very good discipline for us as we go into this week of prayer to very consciously remember these things and to encourage one another with these truths.

[13:40] Thirdly, the spirit of Jesus helps us. This is the problem. How do we know what to pray for? How do we know what to pray for?

One answer might be to say that we should pray for the matters that God has already commended and commanded us to pray for. For instance, pray for your leaders. Pray for workers in the harvest. Pray for one another. Pray for the proclamation of the gospel. You can think of those verses in the Bible and the way in which God has made it very plain that these things are to be prayed for. And this must be right and indeed the platform upon which our praying is set. whatever God commands and encourages in his word. But what about those specific applications that he wants us to pray for?

So we turn into Romans chapter 8 verses 26 and 27. It says this, in the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

[14:49] Let me just give the context of there in Romans 8 that he's been talking about the groaning of creation and he's been talking about the groaning of God's people as they wait for that transforming return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now he's going to talk about another sort of a groaning that takes place in this world at this time. In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

We do not know what we ought to pray for but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

This is a fascinating verse. There's nothing quite like this in the rest of the New Testament to describe the work of the Holy Spirit in our praying.

We're encouraged to pray in the Spirit. We're encouraged to be filled with the Spirit. But here we're given some insight into the Spirit's presence and work within the life of the believer as we pray.

[16:09] And I want us to spend just a little time looking at this. Firstly to draw attention to the fact that this is the work of the Trinitarian God. Clearly the Holy Spirit is spoken about here.

But the Holy Spirit is also called in this chapter rather particularly the Spirit of Christ. Christ. And the Spirit is listened to by the Father.

He who searches our hearts must refer to the Father. And so we have in language here the cooperation of the Holy Spirit with the Lord Jesus Christ and the listening of the Father.

The Spirit here works alongside the believer prompting such praying as in accord with God's will. It's a praying that causes heart burdens that are deeper than word expression.

We do not know what we ought to pray for but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. I don't think that means that words are completely absent but it means that the burden is that deep that words are never going to properly express the burden.

[17:34] Do you get a sense of what this might be about? I suggest that this is about being so helped in our praying that a bold item like pray for workers for the harvest is fleshed out in large that it's focused and it's targeted.

There's clarity there's some detail attached to it. It's a kind of a prayer that doesn't just go through the list and say we're going to pray for workers in the harvest we spend five minutes and then that's it we go on to the next subject matter as if we haven't moved in our understanding during the process of prayer itself.

I think what's being offered here is something richer and deeply encouraging for us. do we know something about this?

If we are content with ticking a list of items we will have done a job but will we have heard God's voice and known his mind? We can know something better deeper and richer if we loiter in our praying probing what the spirit might be encouraging us to express because the nature of the prayer that God loves to hear is that which is upon his own heart which by the spirit is taken and put upon our hearts which we express back to him.

prayer is not a process by which God is ignorant of what we're needing or rather to be persuaded by our much speaking by our clever language something that wasn't on his agenda in the first place but rather our heavenly father has an agenda and he's pleased and privileged us with the possibility being involved with the understanding of that agenda and being given the possibility of being able to touch his heart more and to understand more clearly what is on his mind so that we might bring that to him in our prayers and as we meet together this week I would like to encourage us all to listen very carefully to one another's prayers and to detect how the

[20:21] Holy Spirit is leading and to pick up a thread or to change a metaphor to take up the baton of a thought in prayer that seems to have the Holy Spirit stamp upon it and to run with it and pass it on to another and we might say in passing this is the fantastic privilege and blessing of being together when we pray with two or three together it won't be possible for all of us to meet and there'll be times when we're by ourselves and I'm quite sure that this experience of working in tandem with the Holy Spirit is true for us by ourselves in our bedroom as well but but when we meet together we have this possibility of loitering in our prayers so that we might know the mind of our

Heavenly Father better and why I'm looking forward to this week especially is this that we've set aside an hour in the morning and a bit more than that in the evening where we've just got a focus on a particular subject matter it may be that we want to pray about the ministry of God's word in this church in the coming months that is the subject matter I sense that if we are able to spend that hour grappling with the mind of God on this to try to understand and to humbly to ask of him what do you want of us what sort of prayer do you want us to pray that God will be very pleased to direct and help us it's a thrilling possibility isn't it we are weak but the spirit helps us we don't know what we ought to pray for but the spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express don't confuse that with the intercession of Jesus

Christ but the spirit comes alongside of us in our hearts and he intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express and he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the spirit because the spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will that's for all of us it's a blessed privilege as an opportunity we're going to sing 610 we're going to sing 610 Thank you.