

Prayer

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[0 : 00] Thank you. It's a great story of Nehemiah, of a man who was faithful with prayer and actually received so much just through honouring God in what he was asking and his faithfulness.

I suppose the question is, is this, is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tyre?

It's an interesting one, isn't it? Corrie Ten Boone, that wonderful, faithful person in life, asked the question and I asked the question myself. Is prayer my steering wheel or is it just there in case I need it when a crisis comes?

It's a question we all have to ask ourselves because if I'm honest, and I hope you are too, there are times in my life when I've resorted to prayer only when the wheel has come off, let alone knowing that the spare wheel was there.

What we're talking about here in Philippians, it says, do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, every situation, by prayer and petition, by thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

[1 : 16] And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. That's exactly what Nehemiah did. Nehemiah brought his requests in his heart for the people in every situation.

And also we need to bring that at times not just when the wheel is about to come off, but in our times of thanksgiving as well. And in our series on Christian disciplines, we come to this point about prayer.

Now, Russ last week spoke on this idea of quiet time, which made me break into a sweat. Because if you know me, you know that I struggle with quiet time.

Mandy's just here to reinforce the fact that I don't stop. And if you struggle, like me, in times of stillness and quietness, let alone the idea of a silent retreat, and I've tried a few, but God speaks to me.

Perhaps we need to find out what our own disciplines are in response to prayer. What is our own discipline that encourages us and empowers us more and more to pray in the everyday?

[2 : 30] Now, discipline in itself is a tricky word, because discipline rather conjures up that idea of doing something wrong and being chastised for it.

But again, as any athlete or in fact anyone who is focused on their goals in life will tell you, that it is an essential element of actually achieving that which you seek to achieve, to be disciplined in what we do.

And discipline can be good. If it helps you, I sense God, personally, I sense God in the busyness of life. You know, even in the busyness of life itself, maybe because I struggle to stay still.

And the Lord has to speak very, very clearly to seize my attention. That burning bush of life that seizes me in the middle of the day that says, hang on, Clive, we need to chat.

Very helpful, whatever our own disciplines are. And there are many myths in rituals that have grown up around prayer that you may have found helpful.

[3 : 41] But on the other hand, you may have found unhelpful and may bring guilt, which is the last thing that a discipline of prayer should bring. And when it comes to prayer and discipline, there is an element with some elements of Christian discipleship, where prayer has become a chore.

And I don't say that lightly, because I recall maybe you used those Bible notes, or have used those Bible notes of every day with Jesus. And a friend of mine once said, I think I need something that says every other day with Jesus.

Or maybe they could print one of every week with Jesus. Because that's where my life is. And I recall a lady telling me that her discipline was to come to an 8 a.m. communion, happened to be the Book of Common Prayer.

And on the way out, I said, so what, asking her, what about this 8 o'clock enriches your life? And she looked at me in horror and said, enrich?

What do you mean, young man, enrich my life? She said, this is a requirement. She said, what happens, she said, if during the week something happens to me, and I haven't been to communion at 8 o'clock, I know that I won't go to heaven.

[5 : 05] What a sadness in that understanding of theology, where her morning prayer, instead of being the joy of her life, had become a chore and a stick in which she felt her religion was there to beat her.

We have to think about this discipline of prayer, how we ensure that it is enriching, empowering, engaging, life-giving, powerful part of our discipleship in our life.

And that it is 24-7. I find prayer, and I hope you do too, that it is part of every part of our life. It's 24-7.

And if, like me, you were brought up in the 60s and 70s, you will know that famous advert that was on for a certain alcoholic drink. It was called Martini.

And it said, anytime, anyplace, anywhere, there's a wonderful world we can share. It's the right place, it's the right time, it's... Other drinks aren't available.

[6 : 13] But that's the way it has to be. Prayer is 24-7. Anytime, anyplace, anywhere, it's a wonderful world we can share with others around us.

And that is what it was called to be. It's 24-7 prayer in relationship with Jesus. When it breaks, when that is not the focus of our prayer life and our discipline, in our relationship with Jesus, then it becomes about religion and a chore and ticking a box.

It enriches, it builds up, it encourages, it enlivens not only us. That's why the 24-7 prayer movement is so powerful. In Scripture, witness to it.

Look to the Lord and His strength and seek His face always. In 1 Chronicles. In Matthew 26, watch and pray, so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Amen. Be joyful in hope, patient in affection, faithful in prayer. Romans 12. And of course Thessalonians, which is at the heart of this, pray continually.

[7 : 23] Pray continually. That's what we're encouraged to do. If you've been in industry, or as Harvey will be very shortly into the armed services, you will know that there is a thing called standing operating procedures, SOPs.

The thing is with a standing operation procedure, is that you know what to do in any given circumstance. That you will know that there's a set of things that you can rely on, that almost becomes like second nature, even when you're sleeping.

I mean, probably I can't do it now, but I could, is I could strip down a Glock nine millimeter gun, in my, with, with, within the darkness, whatever, to strip it down, put it back together.

Because when it jams, your life depends on it, but more importantly, other people's life depends on it. And that is prayer. 24-7.

Standing operating procedure. Where do I go? I go to prayer. That is my discipline. That is my first place. Because that, the Lord, is with me. It's being intentional about that discipline.

[8 : 43] It's about a discipline of the heart and the will, that leads to a discipline in prayer. That's what I love about Nehemiah this morning. His heart was for the people. His heart was for a city that had fallen apart.

His heart was for a city far away. So what did he do? Rather than conjure it up, he prayed. And amazingly, the king provided him with everything that he needed to go back and not just rebuild a city, but to rebuild the faith and worship of the people.

Is that our prayer as a community? For the community that we seek to serve? To go and be that focus, to pray for a community that desperately needs it and needs rebuilding.

In the film, Shadowlands, the story of C.S. Lewis, he has just found the love of his life in the form of Joy Gresham.

He found it in later life. And only they had a short time together when Joy was found to have terminal cancer. And there's a little clip to show you now.

[9 : 53] And I think this is so profound and one of the most profound expressions of faith and prayer that resonates in my life and as he responds to the situation.

Jack, what news? Ah, good news, I think, Harry. Yes, good news. Very glad, Jack. Thank you, Christopher. Thank you. Christopher can scoff, but I know how hard you've been praying.

Huh? Now God is answering you. I pray. That's not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping.

It doesn't change God, it changes me. He's got paid a lot. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me.

[11:02] In our reading this morning, Nehemiah, who has survived the exile, continues to pray for his people. He never gives up.

That is his heart. That is his discipline. And when he hears the news, he returns. He returns to rebuild. I taught on a week on Nehemiah, and there was a guy who was sat down near the front, and all the way through, I just knew that the Lord was impacting his life through prayer. He wrote to me two weeks after, to say, the teaching on Nehemiah and on prayer has transformed my life. And he said, I have been totally unsupportive of my church for most of the last two years. And he said, I realised that I needed to change. I realised that prayer should encourage me and empower my leadership. And then I had a letter from his church leader another week after that, to say what a difference that had made, and that he was now really focused, again, back into the life of the church.

Prayer, and prayer can make such a difference. It changes from the outside in, from an excited cupbearer to the king, to a man who goes back in Nehemiah and transforms the people in his community.

[12:34] Open, responsive, inquisitive. That's how our disciplined prayer life should be. Are we asking God to show us the way forward?

Are we asking God for a prophetic word? How can we invite him into our lives fully, more and more? Because often God is knocking, and we're not engaging. As a nine-year-old, I stood in front of this picture in St. Paul's Cathedral.

It's called, it's by Holman Hunt, and it's called Lights of the World. In this picture, there is, I remember as a nine-year-old on a school trip, we stood there.

I thought the man that was showing us was actually, had been there when they actually painted the picture. He was sort of seen that old. But what he told us came to light, that actually, if you notice on the door, that there is no handle on the outside of the door.

that there is ivy that has been growing around the door, and clearly this door hasn't been opened for a long, long time. And yet Jesus stands there patiently, waiting to bring the light into the life, whoever decides to open that door.

[13:50] I've used this image time and time again on Alpha courses, when we talk about prayer. So many people say, I just want to open the door.

Maybe you've opened only the door a little way, in your discipline. The light still comes in. Maybe it's time for people to open the door even wider, and let the light come, and actually see that relationship, how it builds as the light comes in.

Some people just maybe just, who cares, just fling the door open. The one thing is, the handle isn't on the outside, because unlike I used to do, the Lord doesn't come and crash your door at three o'clock in the morning.

He's waiting for us to invite him. He's waiting for that invitation, from each one of us, to open that door and say, in our own discipline of prayer, more of you, Lord.

More of you in our lives. And perhaps that's where we are. We may be, in our prayer life, reticent to open the door wider, because it may mean that we have to change.

[14:56] Who goes from a cupbearer to the king, which was fairly comfortable, to go back to the holy city, to regather a people, with all the controversy that brings, and everything that that brought, working against him, to rebuild the city walls, to rebuild the people.

It means change. And maybe today we need to intentionally open the door a little further. Adrian Rogers says, the prayer offered to God in the morning during the quiet time is the key that unlocks the door of the day.

Any athlete knows that it is the start that ensures a good finish. It's one thing I'd encourage you to encourage you with is maybe as we pray, that you start your day in prayer.

Maybe each of us have got our own way of doing that. Maybe we don't. But could I encourage you, what is your start for the day? I personally like a good breakfast.

You know, I'm not talking about eggs and bacon and everything. I'm talking a good bowl of muesli. You know, keeps me regular for the day in more than one way. And the thing is, is the thing about a good start to the day is maybe your prayer at the beginning of the day is, Lord, I offer myself to you. [16:19] My morning prayer is, Lord, help me not to miss the opportunities. That you lay before me. That's my daily prayer in the morning. Whatever your prayer might be. And I would encourage you to start that day.

We as a team, many on the team here, use Lectio 365. And the Lectio 365 is really easy. It's a downloadable podcast. You get a scripture in the morning.

And for me, I find it really helpful because you can listen to it while you have a cup of tea. And that scripture during the day and that prayer for the day helps you through.

A good start to the day is a good way to start. And if your discipline seems rigid and the ivy has grown over the door, the hinges seem seized, God's strangely inaccessible, then perhaps Pete Gregg's words may help us as he spoke about this very issue about a discipline of prayer.

Because what he said was, sometimes I miss God's presence because he no longer appears to me or speaks to me in the familiar ways of yesterday.

[17:27] Sometimes when I think God has gone silent, it's actually that he is speaking differently in a different dialect, more appropriate to the new landscape I'm about to enter.

If I remain locked in the past by tradition, nostalgia, or a stale imagination, I will most certainly miss the new thing that the now God is forever saying.

That's certainly been the story of my life, of wanting to be where the now God is, where God is at work. The discipline of prayer is a relationship.

I'm going to end, when I sensed, as I was thinking about this today, maybe a prophetic word to bring. And we've talked about prayer.

In our culture, we need a more resilient form of discipleship. Like many of you, you may have been put off from praying with people because the culture around you says that you can't.

[18:48] Maybe you're in a setting where I better not do this because I might lose my job. I better not do this because I'm going to get disciplined.

I better not do this. I would want to encourage you that there is numerous ways of praying for and with people to encourage them and to build them up.

And I sense this, that Jesus frees us from our sin. He can heal. He can bring new life into shattered and broken lives. And I felt this word this morning would be, if we went into A&E; if we went into A&E; and the person welcoming us said, oh, do you like the new decor?

Do you like our new chairs? Oh, by the way, let me show you this new piece of equipment we've just bought. It's over here. Isn't it nice and shiny? Now, the one reason you've walked into A&E; is because you want to be healed, because you're in need.

I'm just wondering how many people we meet, how many people walk into our churches, maybe us, who would walk out through that door, who would walk out in the end of the day having not met with the healing power of Jesus that we can offer in prayer and the way we want to share.

[20:11] In our society, that's focused on idolatry. There is an opposition in our lives. In John's Gospel, it says, for they loved human praise more than praise from God.

They loved human praise more than praise from God. I pray that as we look at our discipline in prayer, we will hear that well done from God.

Well done, good and faithful servant, that you responded. Well done, good and faithful servant, that you sent that word that you had. Good and faithful servant, that you encouraged that person that you met.

Good and faithful servant, that you responded as you've been praying, as you go around, whether you're in the market, whether you're out there, wherever we're doing, that you responded to his prompting, whatever that may be, and it may just be a smile, it may just be a welcome, it may be a card, it may even, if appropriate, being to pray with somebody.

What is our discipline of prayer that is 24-7? Gillian, would you like to come up with a team? We're just going to pray that God would maybe give us a fresh boldness in our discipline of prayer.

[21:25] Maybe you're like that person who's walking into A&E; and you've felt that you've walked in and out of this church time and time and time again, but you walk out the door without that healing power that you've often come searching for.

There'll be people to pray with you now at the back and the prayer ministry team are going to move to the back and if that's you and you would like to pray with somebody, do that now because people are waiting to pray with you.

Maybe well be there has been that undercurrent of God isn't my steering wheel and has always been my spare tyre.

Maybe you want to put him in the driving seat and that can be risky because it may need change.

Maybe we're prepared for that, that Lord, you would take me to places and to people and give me the courage and boldness to respond when you do that, that discipline of prayer.

Maybe today to think, what is that discipline in my life? A good discipline that encourages and builds me up and brings joy rather than a chore or something that I can't do.

[22 : 43] As we finish, we're going to just pray a prayer that's in the Lectio 365 which we pray every day. Every morning becomes part of my prayer life and maybe many others of you here.

Maybe you'd just like to pray that with me. Holy Spirit, should we just come? Holy Spirit, would you come? And instill that spirit of freshness and newness and new life that you bring in our prayer life and in our discipline.

Father, help me to live this day to the full, being true to you in every way. Jesus, help me to give myself away to others, being kind to everyone I meet.

Spirit, help me to love the lost, proclaiming Christ in all I do and all I say. And the people said, Amen.