

The Empowered Life

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Preacher: Rev. Suzy Kirkham

[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. So today we're going to be looking at what it is to have an empowered life that's fuelled by prayer and looking at part of Mark's gospel.

We're going to be looking at this question of what it means to be the church and to be empowered by the church. The church, as I'm sure most of you know here, is not this beautiful building, as beautiful as it may be.

The church is not about the programmes we run or the courses that we run. It's about the people. You are the church. You're the church gathered here on a Sunday morning.

You're the church gathered on a Wednesday communion. You're the church when you go out into your communities tomorrow, when you go to work during the week, and when you're in your small groups, whatever you're doing.

And one of the defining features that makes us different as a community is that we are a praying community. So as I start this morning, I want to ask you this question.

[1 : 14] How is your prayer life? Is your prayer life your steering wheel or your spare tyre? Do you turn to prayer when life gets tough?

When you face challenges? What do you turn to? When you need things? When you're so desperate that all you can do is cry out to God?

Maybe you don't actually believe in prayer. Maybe you don't think prayer actually makes a difference. Maybe you don't pray. Maybe you've been hurt by unanswered prayer in your life and you struggle to pray.

Or maybe you're just one of those people that likes to talk to God all throughout the day and pray continuously. Something that I'm really always amazed at, amazed at continually, is that through Jesus Christ, we all here have access to God.

It was Henry Newham, the theologian, who said, Prayer is important because it's that place where you and I can hear the voice of one that calls us, your beloved daughter or your beloved son.

[2 : 24] So today we're looking at the passage in Mark's Gospel and I'd recommend that you read the whole book if you've got an hour to yourself. Because it's an action-packed look at Jesus' life.

Just in the first 34 verses of this first chapter, we see that Jesus has been baptised, he's been tempted in the wilderness, he's gathered his disciples together, he's driven out evil spirits and he's healed Simon's mother-in-law.

Not bad for 34 verses. His life was full. And Jesus had lots of pressure on him in lots of different ways. And I'm pretty sure now, as the holidays draw to a close, we're thinking about the new term, when everybody's getting back in their old routine, maybe we're starting work again, going to school again, starting college or university, or maybe we just know that we've got various pressures going on in the next few months.

Maybe from work or from family, from friends, deadlines that we've got to meet. But with Jesus, rather than just relentlessly driving forward, he prioritised his time with the Father.

And we read in those words, very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, he left the house, and he went off to a solitary place where he prayed. And that is where we begin today, thinking about prayer.

[3 : 48] Because all of us here, as followers of Jesus, prayer needs to be the foundation of all that we do. It needs to fuel everything in our lives. So we're just going to look at three things this morning.

When to pray, where to pray, and why we've got to pray. So firstly, when to pray. Now most of you here may have heard the expression, larks and owls.

Larks are those people, which I'm not one of them, who jump out of bed at six o'clock when the alarm goes off, get their coffee, run out into the day, and have an amazing day. But by six o'clock, they're starting to wilt.

And they better be in bed by nine o'clock, because they've had it. And then owls, on the other hand, a bit like myself, we just quite don't speak to me before 11 o'clock in the morning. I just sort of start to wake up then.

And then by six o'clock, I'm feeling quite good. And then I'm like ten o'clock at night, I'm raring to go when everybody else is asleep. So maybe a quick survey amongst us, there's no judgement. Who is a lark here, maybe?

[4 : 52] Put your hand up. Lovely. And who are the owls? Okay. So we don't know whether Jesus was a lark or an owl. But what we do know is that he got up early in the morning, while it was still dark.

Jesus got up. He didn't only pray in the morning. We know he prayed at night and during the day. He prayed on his own. He prayed with his disciples. He prayed up the mountains.

He prayed at different places, different times, and in different ways. And in Thessalonians, Paul reminds us, pray without ceasing always, at all times, steadfastly, constantly, night and day.

So we get the picture. Prayer is to be a continual conversation with God throughout our lives. There are times when we pray praise, we thank God for who he is. There are times when we intercede, when we pray for different people in the world.

There are times when we just cry out our hearts to God. And also times when we are just silent and we listen. There are times when we pray on our own. We pray in pairs.

[5 : 56] We pray in small groups. But however we pray, prayer should be as regular and as natural as breathing. What Jesus is modelling here in Mark's Gospel is the importance of you and I starting our day with God.

And on three occasions in Mark's Gospel, we read about Jesus praying while others were asleep.

And I think that's what he's trying to demonstrate to us here, is the importance of you and I going to our Father at the beginning of the day to fuel and empower everything that we do.

Because if we don't take that little bit of time, we risk that we just go into the day doing everything in our own strength. We become detached from God. Temptation becomes harder to resist.

People just generally really annoy us. Relationships become under strain. And work can seem like a battle. And we lose our sense of direction, why we're doing what we're doing. And you and I know that this Christian life, in part, is about sacrifice.

We see that most with Jesus on the cross. But what are you sacrificing to spend time with God? Is it sleep? Is it time on your phone or your computer?

[7 : 07] Or time with the family? Even if you are an owl and you absolutely hate mornings, he's okay with you just spending five minutes slumped in a chair with a coffee with him.

Make it a priority. So I encourage you, as we're thinking about this new term starting, think about how you can improve your everyday prayer life. It may be just five minutes, or it may be just two minutes.

But Psalm 5 says, In the morning, lay your request before God and wait on him expectantly. Wait on him expectantly. And I believe that we'll see a difference in our lives and the lives of those around us, if we do.

So next, where to pray? So Jesus left the house, we read, and went off to a solitary place to pray. Now, in some ways, it doesn't matter where you pray. The important thing is finding somewhere that you can go each day to be with God.

Some people like sitting in their favourite chair. Others like walking and praying. Some people find it really helpful to kneel and focus on prayer. Other people like myself know that if I kneel, I'll never get back up, so I can't do it that way.

[8 : 16] But Jesus is teaching us to find somewhere that is quiet and where you can go regularly to meet with God. The Bible says Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. And it was this routine that he had in his life that we are to replicate.

And if we really want to discern God's will in our lives, if you are desperate for God in your life, then we have got to get into this routine that the very first thing we do in our day is to come before God. Whether we're praying to him and listening to him, it means finding somewhere where your phone is not on and going to distract you. Or it means somewhere, if you've got a family, where they're not

going to distract you either.

Jesus says these words in the message, find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. So just go there, quietly and simply and honestly.

And gradually, your focus will shift from yourself to God and will start to sense his peace and his grace. And if you've got somewhere that you've been praying regularly for ages and it's not working, then change it up.

[9 : 24] Try something new. And finally, and most importantly, why we pray at all. So before we try and answer this question, we need to be clear that we don't just pray as Christians out of a sense of duty.

We don't pray because that's what Christians do. We don't pray because we've got a massive Christmas list that we want him to deliver for us. We need to understand, first of all, why did Jesus pray?

He was the son of God. He's God incarnate. He performs miracles. Why does he need to pray? Well, we see in the scriptures that there's a trend in the relationship between Jesus and his father. Jesus says, Jesus says, I can do nothing on my own. And we see this connectedness between Jesus and the father. There's a level of dependency between them. Jesus could not do the life on his own.

He didn't want to do it on his own. He wanted desperately to be in a relationship as much as he could with his father. He needed his father's power and his strength, his authority to empower him in his life.

[10 : 33] And it came from prayer. And to be honest, if Jesus needed it, then I think we do too. Only when you and I realise that we can't do this life on our own, prayer begins to make sense.

Because if we just have a life lacking in prayer, we're prayerless. We're telling God we don't need him. Because we just start to live a life that's independent from God and based on our own strength, making our own decisions, what we think, what we feel.

Or we're dependent on God and we trust in him and we lean with everything we have on him with prayer. It's often, I find, when we get to the end of ourselves, and I know this from my life, when I've reached the end of myself, I then have moved to God in prayer.

And I find that the most passionate and heartfelt prayers that I have prayed and I've heard others prayed when they have reached the end of themselves. We can do this no more and we give our control over to God.

And these prayers aren't beautiful, long-worded, well-crafted prayers. They're roars of our heartfelt cries that come from deep within us. They reflect that true relationship between us and God.

[11 : 46] And throughout scripture, people came to Jesus who had reached the end of themselves. They were helpless. The blind man that had no sight in John. The crippled man by the pool who couldn't even get out of the water.

And the official son that had poor health. All of them had reached the end of themselves. I'm going to tell you a story now. Probably most of you will be aware of this.

And I vaguely was. But I've been amazed as I've read through it more. The story about something that happened during the Second World War. On the 26th of May 1940, it looked like Britain had reached its end.

It was one of those moments that was the most intense period during the Second World War. When the army was trapped at Dunkirk and the Germans were fighting hard against them.

And it looked like we were at our worst and darkest time. King George VI called the whole nation to pray. He called this country to pray through a broadcast because he knew that the battle was not just against flesh and blood but it was against evil.

[12 : 53] The powers in the holy realm. And so he called this nation to turn back to God and to turn to Jesus in prayer for help. And churches and cathedrals up and down this land were absolutely packed with people.

So just that in itself to me was amazing that people all over the country on one day all got together and prayed. But actually I don't know if you know the amazing events that happened after that day. The following day of prayer there were two miracles that happened. The first was that in the morning of the next day the Luftwaffe had got a bombing campaign planned for that day and they were going to drop a load of bombs.

But there was a massive storm between Dover and Dunkirk and the planes couldn't fly. So they just called off their bombing flight that day.

And then the second thing that happened was surely afterwards the weather cleared and that meant that thousands of boats from the Royal Navy warships right down to tiny little sailing boats could cross the English Channel and because of that they saved thousands of men and people who were trapped at Dunkirk.

[14 : 02] In fact hundreds of thousands. And it was Churchill who went on to say that this was the miracle of Dunkirk. And later on that year on the 9th of June the king appointed that day as a day of thanksgiving to say thank you to God for all he'd done in delivering the nation out of their darkest hour.

All of those people streaming into Westminster Abbey and churches up and down this land prayed because they believed that prayer changes things. The course of history was changed.

And for us too I believe that when we pray God acts when we intercede when we call on him. One of my favourite worship songs is Waymaker and what I love about it is when it says even when I don't see it you're working even when I don't feel it you're working you never stop you never stop working.

And the more we pray even when things are really tough and you know we're struggling with things we become less anxious. The more we pray the less dependent we are on our own strength.

And the more we pray we also see things from God's view and see his priorities. And this is what happened here for Jesus. We read in this that the disciples hunted him down they came and found him and said come on come away from praying the crowds need you.

[15 : 27] But Jesus knew what his calling was and that was to share the gospel and he knew how to differentiate between the urgent and the important. He knew that he had to spend time with his father alone if he was going to do what God called him to do.

So as we look to the new term when we all know that we're going to start to get busy again back to work back to school back to doing whatever voluntary stuff we're doing and then it will be Christmas I want to ask you again how is your prayer life?

Do you want to grow in your relationship with God? Sorry. And are you dependent on your relationship with God? Or if you're really honest do you actually depend on your own strength and your own ability?

And what are you going to do to sacrifice some time to improve your prayer life? So in order to spend some more time with God in prayer I'm just going to suggest that we take a couple of minutes now to do what we've just been talking about to pray.

This isn't a solitary place but it's going to be a quiet place for a couple of minutes. And this is your opportunity to come before God. Maybe you need to praise him to cry out to him silently in your heart.

[16 : 44] Maybe you need to admit that you've been doing this in your own strength. Or maybe you're struggling with an answered prayer and it hurts and you need to tell him that. Whatever it is let's do as Jesus said just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage.

And let your focus shift from you to God and you'll begin to sense his grace and peace. And let's do this. Thank you.