

Glimpses of Glory God's praying servants

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[0:00] Morning, church. It's good to see you all. If you don't know me, my name is John, and I'm on the ministry team here. And we're concluding our series from Isaiah today.

Wrapping it all up, and as we've been unpacking Isaiah, under broad themes, we've seen God's holiness, God's presence and rule, that he is king, he's judge, he delivers, he arrives, he offers rest, as victory is the suffering servant and the light of the world.

In Isaiah, we've seen glimpses of God's glory and grace. It's a giant arrow pointing to Jesus. It's a bridge from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

As we close the curtain on Isaiah, Jesus tears the temple curtain in two and opens our relationship with God. Jesus is the piece that completes the puzzle, fulfilling all prophecy in scripture.

Today from Isaiah, we conclude with God's praying servants. What's your prayer life like? What do you pray?

[1:11] Do you believe God answers prayer? Do you feel like you've been praying for some time about some issue, and it seems like God's just not listening?

Maybe you feel too busy to pray. Maybe you're too busy to pray, or maybe you're too busy to not pray, and you recognize we need to give everything over to God each and every new day.

I was once given a bookmark from someone. It was a buddy week at school, and it just said, a day hemmed in prayer is less likely to unravel.

Edward Bounds concluded, prayer is the easiest and hardest of all things. The simplest and the sublimest, the weakest and the most powerful.

The results lie outside the range of human possibilities. They are limited only by the omnipotence of God. And Keller, prayer is all before an infinite force, and yet it's intimacy with a personal friend.

[2:11] I'm not sure what your prayer life is like, but hopefully today, as we go to Isaiah, we will consider what it looks like to be God's praying servants. Isaiah 64 gives a powerful motive to pray with passion.

The motive is the recognition that we need God to revive our hearts, our nation, and our world.

Isaiah 64 begins with a plea. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down.

That the mountains would tremble before you. Isaiah can foresee a time in the future, events that would actually take place 200 years after his ministry, the defeat of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians.

He sees Jerusalem destroyed, desolation, the temple ruined and burned with fire, and the people are in exile. He then imagines what it would be like for the exiles to return.

He sees all that was treasured in verse 10 is now a wasteland, and in verse 11 is lying in ruins. He cries out, desperate for God to hear him.

[3:20] Oh, that God would rend the heavens and come down. In effect, his prayer is, come down, show up, do something, anything. God, put things right.

Isaiah prays with passion because he knows the story of God and his people, that God's people are hard-hearted and disobedient, yet God remains faithful and merciful, as we just heard from Ash.

He's slow to anger and abounding in love. Isaiah makes his plea based on what God has done in the past. Oh, that you would come down.

It's a reference to the exodus, when God did come down, delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and at Mount Sinai, the mountain trembled.

Isaiah is asking for another exodus. As he sees the future exile living in slavery under the rule of foreign kings, he wants God to put things right.

[4:23] But he sees a problem. Why should God bother to listen or intervene if they continue in their sinfulness? Verse 5. You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your

ways, but when we continue to sin against them, you are angry.

How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. We all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind, our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you, for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins. Isaiah recognizes that while he cries out to God for help, there is something in the way.

The human heart is hard. Past, present, and future discretions are a barrier to God, and we see this terrifying image of God hiding his face from his people.

I can guarantee we do not want God to turn his back on us. Isaiah's plea is more than asking God to intervene in a battle between Israel and her enemies.

[5:38] This goes far deeper. It's not just the war between Israel and God, it's a universal problem. Humanity versus God. If I asked you what problems you're facing right now, have a little think, don't actually have to answer me, but I wonder if it's something like rising interest rates or mortgage repayments, energy costs, maybe redundancy, getting into the property market, marriage issues.

Now these are real and significant problems. Israel would have said at the time of Isaiah, the Assyrians, and later on the Babylonians, or the Romans, and their military machines.

But our number one problem is God. We've made God our enemy. And how can we protect ourselves when God is our enemy? Isaiah's plea for God to come down is to revive our hearts.

It's because we've set up ourselves as enemies of God, and there's nothing we can do to save ourselves. Even if we think we can clean up our act ourselves, Isaiah's a step ahead, reminding us in verse 6 that our good works are like filthy rags.

We can't clean up our own act ourselves because deep down we're unclean people. Even the good things we do are signs of our proud self-reliance.

[7:06] No matter how respectable we may seem, we are all enemies of God. It's not just that we can't please God. Left to ourselves, we won't even ask for help. Human beings are hardwired for a deep-seated bias against God.

Verse 7, no one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you. Doesn't it remind you of Romans as well, where it says, there is no one righteous, not even one, no one who seeks God.

All have turned away. God must do the work on our behalf. In verse 5, how else then can we be saved? So in verse 8 begins with a yet.

Yet in other words, despite our sinfulness, God is gracious. Yet you, Lord, are our Father. Isaiah reminds God that we are the work of his hands.

God, you're the potter. We are the clay. In verse 9, the prayer continues. Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord. Do not remember our sins forever.

[8:17] O look on us, we pray, for we are all your people. Isaiah sees a bigger reason to save us. He's appealing to God's very nature, that God is a merciful Father.

Isaiah's plea, don't let us feel the full force of your anger. Verse 12, please don't punish us beyond measure. what our sins deserve.

Hope can only be found if our Father in Heaven shows mercy and finds some way to avert the punishment we deserve. We need a bigger exodus, an exodus from sin and judgment.

We can't be the people we want to be, let alone the people we should be. We are slaves to our selfishness and pride. We've put ourselves in opposition to God, so either God is going to be God, or we are going to be God.

And by doing that, we're on a collision course with God, and only one of us is going to survive that collision. We need a bigger exodus, one that sets us free from sin and judgment.

[9:29] This is what Isaiah promised and what Jesus delivered. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record the baptism of Jesus, answering Isaiah's plea for God to rend the heavens and come down.

Mark 1. At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open.

Isaiah's plea, rend the heavens, and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, you are my son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.

As Jesus rose from the waters of the Jordan, that new exodus was just beginning. Just like Israel through the Red Sea, it was the cross and resurrection that Jesus passed through judgment and came out the other side to set us free.

Salvation is all the initiative and work of our Father in heaven, finding its completion in Jesus. The prayer of Isaiah 64 is answered in the next chapter, verse 1, chapter 65.

[10:40] I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me. I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, here am I.

Here am I. While we're not looking for God, God found us and reveals himself to us. The new exodus has begun and one day Jesus will return.

Isaiah ends with judgment, the next chapter. The heavens will rend open for a final time and God will come to vindicate his people, bring peace to a wasteland and renew creation.

But this message of salvation is of no use unless people respond with faith. And how can people know if they don't hear? That means the message must be proclaimed.

It's the church's mission. Paul quotes Isaiah 65 in Romans 10. God is found by those who do not seek him because God sends us to them and opens their eyes.

[11:44] Paul concludes, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news. Earlier I asked, what is your prayer life like? And I asked, what do you pray?

The gospels remind us that prayer was integral in Jesus' life. Jesus would withdraw to deserted places to pray. We read this time and time again.

Jesus took time out to pray, to talk to God. And what did he pray? We do know one of his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. Not my will, but your will be done.

Prayer is vital in the kingdom of God and in our relationship with God to seek God's will. The basic purpose of prayer is not to bend God's will to mine, but to mould my will to his.

Even the lead singer of U2, Bono, recognises this and he was asked, do I pray? And he said, of course I pray. And he said, what sort of things do you pray? And he says, I pray to get to know the will of God because then the prayers have more chance of coming true.

[12:56] I mean, that's just the thing about prayer, seeking God's will. Prayer's been around for a long time. It's not only Christians who pray, but there is one thing that is compelling and unique to Christianity, which I'll get to in a moment.

But we'll just unpack how other people have communed or attempted. Other faith traditions might place flags at the top of a mountain. They might write prayers on them and hoping that the closer it is to the top of the mountain, those prayers will go up and maybe speak to someone so they write them and let the wind take them up.

Or there's prayer wheels and they write prayers and put them in the wheels and they spin them hoping again that they go heavenward. Others show their devotion by burning incense and burning down, lying prostrate before idols or facing a certain direction east and pray five times a day religiously and that often just involves reciting slabs of their sacred scriptures.

And on that particular faith tradition, you have to pray five times a day and if you just miss one prayer once ever in your life and only pray four times a day instead of five, there's no assurance of salvation. That particular faith tradition has 99 attributes of God, none of them are father.

Other religions pray facing a sacred wall or they'll write prayers and jam them in the cracks. They'll light candles or they'll go through beads and mantras.

[14:17] They might pray to an icon or a statue or a saint hoping that God will put in a good word for them. Jesus said, when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites that are allowed to pray standing in the synagogue and on the street corners to be seen by others.

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans for they think they'll be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them for your father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus then went on to teach his followers how to pray the Lord's Prayer.

The unique thing about Christian prayer is that it's relational. We have direct access to the throne room of God through faith in Jesus by God's grace because Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, the high priest who intercedes with our father on our behalf.

There's no praying to saints or monotonous rituals or babbling. It's simply talking directly to God in Jesus' name. Direct access does remind me, sorry to use this illustration, but it does remind me of the old Adam West Batman where Commissioner Gordon, the police chief of Gotham City, would pick up the bat phone and sure enough Batman would pick it up at the other end.

What is it, chief? He had direct access to Batman. That's a silly maybe illustration, but we have direct access to God through Jesus. Prayer is one of those aspects of the Christian life where we don't often know where to start or that we neglect, but Jesus invites us in the Lord's Prayer to pray

and he gives us a framework to follow in our pursuit of prayer.

[15 : 55] And I originally was going to unpack all that, but that's a sermon for another day. Prayer to our Heavenly Father through his son Jesus is unique. It's personal, it's intimate, it's relational, it's to be an integral part of our lives.

In James 4 verse 8 we're reminded, draw near to God and I will draw near to you. Like Isaiah, we need to pray in a trusting way. Remember, Isaiah was praying in a wasteland.

Australia is a spiritual wasteland. Isaiah was not super motivated to pray because everything was going okay. He sees desolation and ruin. But that doesn't mean he prayed less.

It meant he prayed more. He prays that God shows up and that hearts are revived. Yet you, Lord, are our Father. Prayer is vital in the Kingdom of God.

Martin Luther speaks of the importance of prayer. He says, to be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing. We need to be reminded of the priority of prayer if we're to be servants who live for God's Kingdom.

[17 : 12] If we follow the model of the Lord's Prayer, our prayers will be God-centered as we put our Heavenly Father first and seek His will, not our own. As we pray for God's Kingdom to come, we need to be making every effort to herald that Kingdom.

Witnessing, loving, bearing fruit, seeking justice, showing compassion, forgiving. We work with God in God's strength to reach out with the Gospel, not holding back, and create every opportunity for people of every age to hear the Gospel.

Pray for Boom next week. Pray for Alpha. Be bold. Invite people. Pray for opportunities to share your faith. That's praying that God's will will be done for all generations to hear the Gospel, for God's Kingdom to be established.

And I've always found that when you pray that prayer, that prayer is answered. But a really distinct memory of being early on in my marriage, we decided to go to Vietnam, and Vietnam back then was not as developed as it is today, and it actually wasn't safe to be a Christian.

And we heard of Doug Naguian, who ran an evangelical church in Dalat in the south. We heard they were short of Bibles, and he'd been imprisoned at times and beaten just for being a Christian.

[18 : 38] And so we went to the Bible Society, and we got five full Bibles in Vietnamese and 20 New Testaments in Vietnamese. And we went through customs, and you know when you go to those X-ray machines, and they scan everything, and I was just praying.

Because at that point, if they'd seen the Bibles, they could have confiscated those and sent us home. We wouldn't have even got to have the trip to Vietnam. So I was praying, God, please let these Bibles go through. Just as it's going through the scanner, they changed guards.

And it went through, and I just picked it up on the other side. And so then I said, did you see that? Thanks, God. And so I remember going up this escalator, and then we went to see Doug, and he didn't know it was coming, and he was really thankful for the Bibles, but his English was poor.

And so he sat there with one Bible in Vietnamese, pointing to numbers, though. I could work out if it was Matthew, and I was pointing in my Bible, and so we're sharing Bible verses and sort of nodding at each other, and we did pray together.

One of the ones he pointed to was Matthew 9, 27. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. And I was able to point to 1 Thessalonians 5, 17, which says, it talks about Paul's encouragement to pray without ceasing.

[19 : 48] And Acts 6, verse 4, to give ourselves over continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word. Jesus himself talks about when you pray, be persistent, like the widow before the unjust judge.

She just kept coming. But God answers prayer. When you pray, give me an opportunity to share my faith, God answers that prayer. Each Christian's prayer life has common factors about which one can generalize, and also uniqueness, which no other Christian's prayer life will be able to match. I'm not going to give you any guilt trip. All our prayer lives are different. You are you, I am I, and we each have our own walk with God. Some of us talk more, others less.

Some are constantly vocal. You could have a disciplined time of prayer in the morning or in the evening or when you're lying in bed just before you fall asleep or you fall asleep praying. Maybe you get up early, I don't know.

I pray when I'm driving with my eyes closed. It's such a, no, I don't. I pray when I'm driving with my eyes open. You're allowed to pray with your eyes open. Others cultivate silence before God as their

way of adoration.

[21:00] Yet we may all be praying as God means us to pray. Having a running dialogue with God, pray without ceasing. You don't even have to pray out loud. The scriptures remind us that the Lord knows our thoughts.

That's in Psalm 139. And that God never slumbers in Psalm 121. So God hears our prayers. I read this the other day. Just see how this fits with you.

You asked for strength that you might achieve. You were made weak that you might obey. You asked for health that you might do greater things. You were given infirmity that you might do better things.

You asked for riches that you may be happy. You were given poverty that you might be wise. You asked for power that you might have the praise of others. You were given weakness that you might feel the need of God.

You asked for all things that you might enjoy life. You were given life that you might enjoy all things. You received nothing that you asked for or hoped for, yet your prayers were all answered, each and every one.

[22:09] Keller says this, we can be sure our prayers are answered precisely in the way we would want them to be answered if we knew everything God knows.

There is no unanswered prayer. He hears the desires of our heart and responds to your needs in ways beyond your wisdom. Just as Isaiah prayed, persistently and earnestly pleading with God, what situations or people are you praying for right now?

Do you pray for God to come down and revive your heart and the hearts of others, to free them from sin and death by giving them faith in Christ? When we pray, it's asking our Father in Heaven to keep His promises, that He is merciful and to achieve His purposes for His glory and name.

At the end of the day, we need to bring all things before God and recognize that to pray is to accept that we are and always will be wholly dependent on God for everything.

So we're going to have a time of prayer now. We're going to begin by sharing the Lord's Prayer together the way Jesus taught us to pray. So let's pray. Amen.