

# Prayer Week

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Date: 31 January 2015

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[ 0 : 00 ] You guys came in pumped last Sunday night, off summer camp, full of energy, the music team at the front, and the place was just alive and electric. And I'm hoping the afterglow of that's still going on for you.

But you missed a great sermon in the morning here last Sunday morning because Steve spoke on prayer, and he spoke from Matthew chapter 9 in particular. And he used a particular image which just set my heart on fire.

I loved, because he spoke about the love of the Lord Jesus Christ for people, and he talked about the passage in Matthew 9 when Jesus saw the crowds, and he looked at them and he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

And Steve in his message drew out this particular word used in the Greek Bible which means that Jesus was moved with gut-churning, gut-wrenching compassion for the people who were standing in front of him, especially for those who don't know to call him Father.

God loves the lost. The Lord's Prayer, which we pray often in church, begins with the extraordinarily familiar way of speaking to God, Father, our Father.

[ 1 : 17 ] Our society tells lies against God and makes all sorts of accusations against God. You'll hear it at school, you'll hear it at uni, you'll hear it in the workplace.

We put things on God which are absolutely untrue. We say things like he doesn't care. He doesn't care when we hurt or we blame him for how bad the world is and how nasty stuff happens.

We say what sort of a maker creates the pain and the disorder that we live in. If he's so perfect, why isn't his world so perfect? Heard those sort of questions and those things said about God?

I read about Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus in John 11 the other day and I read it from a different English version and I was struck by not just the tears that Jesus cried but the anger that Jesus had, the passionate anger and then the tears as he encountered the devastation that death had brought to his friend's family.

And it was with passion and it was anger that he marched to the tomb and he ordered the tomb opened and Lazarus to come out and to be released from death. That is God's attitude towards death.

[ 2 : 31 ] God is deeply distressed by the brokenness of our world and he takes huge action to reconcile the world to himself through the life of his son.

And the scriptures show us time and time again him inviting us into the safety and the security of relationship with him. He allows us to become his children.

He permits us to call him father. If you ask me what my signature verse is, you know, sometimes you can pick up on preachers and think they go to a particular verse over and over again and I hope I'm not too easily marked but one that can mark me is John chapter 1 verse 12.

To all who received Jesus, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. Preaching about prayer again tonight, I'm preaching from James chapter 5 in particular.

Keep your Bibles open so you can be looking at what I'm saying and reading it from the word at the same time. I think it'd be really easy, too easy and a bit bland to talk about prayer as an activity that we ought to do.

[ 3 : 48 ] It's another thing that we've got to do to be a proper Christian. It's just yuck. Another box to tick in a long, long list of things that we ought to do to please God.

Our duty. I hate it. I've been in churches where people have all sorts of different ideas towards prayer and I've been in churches where people thought that prayer was more spiritual when it occurred in a particular form of meeting.

You know, the whole of church prayer meeting that happened to happen in a particular way at a particular time. And if we didn't have a meeting like that, then we weren't really a proper church. Or where a church service wasn't really a proper church service if you hadn't said the Lord's Prayer because the Lord gave us the Lord's Prayer and we should be saying the Lord's Prayer every time we meet together, even though it might happen to be a template and the things that the Lord's Prayer are talking about are things that we should be doing all the time.

Or, and this might be your problem more than mine, but younger people getting cranky with older people because they open up a prayer book and they pray set prayers which have been written by somebody a long time ago. And you get hot and cranky and think, that's far less authentic than somebody standing out the front and saying the first thing that comes into their head.

I've been to seven different churches while I've been on leave. And I've heard prayers prayed so quickly that you didn't even know that the prayer time had just happened. I've heard people pray and tell God how to run the politics of Australia.

[ 5 : 32 ] The most wonderful experience of prayer for me was the week after the Lent Cafe siege that occurred in Martin Place. And I was in a very formal, old-style Anglican service with not many people in church.

And my heart was deeply moved by an old man who led the prayers with heartfelt passion. And he went far beyond reading a form of words on a page.

He prayed old prayers, he prayed his words, but he was talking to God in a way that I was glad to be part of. And I earnestly said amen to his prayers.

It was alive. And I want to say tonight that prayer is the overflow of a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's not confined to church. It's whole of life. It's part of knowing Christ. It's part of living in this father-child relationship that Christ has done everything to bring us into.

[ 6 : 40 ] It's his gift to us. And prayer is vital. And it's alive. And it's constant. And it's unsophisticated. I remember back when some of my friends first came to Christ.

And they were so excited because sometimes they were going into the city. And they were praying for a parking space that God had given the space they needed near the venue. And I look back now and scratch my head and think, oh. But what was good about what they were doing was they knew the Lord Jesus.

They were excited about what the Lord Jesus was doing for them. And they were just praying about everything. Like babbling toddlers in the presence of our Father pouring out our hearts to him.

Immature, yes, but alive in faith absolutely as well. And at the same time as we grow in Christ and as we grow in the scriptures, our prayer should mature to be more and more in submission to his will but still alive.

And I think that's where James takes us with this burst on prayer. He's trying to build. At the very end of his letter, he's trying to build and instruct vibrant Christian communities where prayer is an overflowing part of their life.

[ 7 : 51 ] For us at St. Paul's where prayer just flows out of us. So he says, verse 13. Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy?

Let him sing songs of praise. Is anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.

The Lord will raise him up. And if he sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

And I think I could add my bit from other parts of scripture and I would say, pray at all times and in all places and in every circumstance of life. And in a way, James has just done that.

He's got life covered by the different circumstances that he's put in front of us. So verse 13. Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray. In the bad times, life is full of suffering and difficulty.

[ 8 : 54 ] Sometimes we bring trouble on ourselves by making stupid choices. Or it comes from the hand of others. We don't control it. Or we find ourselves drowning in heartaches that we have no control over.

I was talking to some people not far away during the week. Our mum and dad. Our mum and dad. And absolutely grieved that doctors have given their 12-year-old boy a 50-50 chance of surviving

the cancer that he's suffering from at the moment.

And one of those mums and the mum, one parent was really peaceful but tearful that God is in the midst of their suffering.

And the other parent at the moment is struggling with the goodness and the justice of God. But whatever the circumstances and however you got into them, our heavenly father invites us to come to him and to pray.

The words of the Lord Jesus in other places. Matthew's gospel. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Or Peter in 1 Peter 5, verse 7.

[10:04] Cast all your cares on Jesus because he cares for you. We have a heavenly father who delights that we bring our troubles and our concerns to him.

And to place them into his hands. Someone who knows about our troubles and knows about our cares. And he cares about them even more than we do.

A few times lately I felt like God was leading me into a desert. And friends would say loving things to me. They'd say, oh, God has something amazing in store for you.

And as kind as that is, and it is really kind, I don't think it's necessarily true. Because Christians suffer. I think I've got to look at other parts of the world.

Christians suffer shocking injustice. And sometimes they walk through very deep waters indeed. And I've been thinking about it lots.

[11:14] Because I'm thinking, well, where can I anchor my hope? And God comforted me with the words of the Lord Jesus in John 7 the other week. Jesus says he's the living water.

And that he would pour out his spirit on his children. And he's picking up on how God provided for his children Israel when they were wandering in the desert.

And he gave them water in the middle of the desert where there were no reservoirs and taps to turn on and stuff like that. They didn't know where it was going to come from. But God gave it to them when they needed it. And for me, it's a great comfort that God won't lead us into a desert without providing for us.

The desert journey might be very rough indeed, but he is with us. So he says to us, keep talking to him. But life isn't always tough.

Sometimes it's pretty good. Success in business, new boyfriend, girlfriend, going okay at the moment, happiness in the family, great times at church. Enjoy them.

[12:24] Be thankful for them. Verse 13, is anybody happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Praise God, giving him the thanks and glory for a season of life which is enjoyable and trouble-free.

Might be the safe birth of a child. It might be a restful family holiday. Supportive friends. School finishes. Exams are over. Pressure's off. Nobody's on your back saying, are you studying? Where are you going out to tonight?

Aren't you supposed to be putting your nose into the books for a little bit longer? You've got a respite for a while. Free of it. I'm having time for serving at church without it feeling like a burden. Another thing that I've got to do. It's a joyous time of life. I think we are really quick to pray when the pressure's on. So when life is tough. But when life is okay, we can feel pretty self-sufficient and less dependent on our Heavenly Father.

And James says to us, he says, don't forget God. Sing out your joy to Him, your delight in Him. Let people see your joy and your happiness in your Heavenly Father. So what's he say?

[13:28] He says, in bad times, pray. In good times. Pray. Praise. And then he says, there will be times when you need other people to pray for you.

In fact, the elders, the leaders in the church, people with the apostolic ministry of the word and prayer. Verse 14. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray for you.

He should call the elders of the church to pray for him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise him up.

And if he has sinned, he will be forgiven. It's a particular kind of trouble. Sickness. Serious illness. And one of the things as a pastor that I regard as a very deep privilege is to be invited into people's lives as they grapple with debilitating illness or very, very serious life events.

And it's a joy to be able to bring, not solutions, but the word of God and prayer to them and sometimes to see physical healing and other times to bring God's comfort, even though the ultimate outcome may even be death.

[ 14 : 36 ] Now, I think some people use this passage in a doubly cruel way. In the ancient world and in the modern world, maybe you sometimes associate serious illness with sin.

I've got to tell you that in my heart of hearts, I think this is really yucky, but in my heart of hearts, I sometimes do the same. And I have no right to and I am really wrong when I do it.

We think God is making people sick because of their sin. You see that going on in John chapter 9. There's a man who's blind from birth.

And the religious leaders come up to Jesus and they ask Jesus about this place. They say, who sinned? Was it him who sinned or was it his mum and dad who sinned that this has happened to him? Now, they didn't have any other solution.

For them, it was one or the other. It had to be sin. They just couldn't figure out whose sin it was. It was a mum and dad's or did he do something wrong while he was in utero? And Jesus blows their thinking out of the water when he says, well, neither.

[ 15 : 47 ] This has happened so that God would be glorified and then Jesus proceeded to heal him and God was glorified. And Jesus, in that one action, that one event with that one man makes it very clear that sin and sickness are not necessarily linked at all.

But sometimes they are. And James says, when you read very carefully here, he says, if he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

If, if, if he has sinned, he will be forgiven. So the brother or sister who is ill, who humbles themselves to other believers and asks for the Lord's mercy will be forgiven unconditionally.

And it's extraordinary, isn't it? Because you could be on your deathbed and reflecting on moments in life.

You could be thinking back even now to moments in life which fill you with incredible shame. And the Lord Jesus says, we will be forgiven when we humbly seek God's healing and forgiveness through his people.

[ 17 : 13 ] And whatever that dark moment is that your own heart condemns you for, Jesus is able to wipe it clean and he is more than generous to cleanse and to forgive you.

And he gives us eternal life. He makes us able to stand before him. And even if we die from our sickness, we will not die eternally if we are forgiven by Christ.

The other cruel twist on this verse is to saying to someone that the reason they're not recovering is because they don't have enough faith.

That's a really nasty thing to say to anyone. Try saying that to the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 when he's talking about his thorn in the flesh that won't go away.

Or to every believer who has died in the last 2,000 years. Everybody who dies as a Christian. Tell them that they didn't have enough faith. It's nonsense.

[ 18 : 26 ] It's nonsense. But look very carefully at the verse. It's not the sick person's faith. It's the prayer that the elders offer in faith.

So if you want to say there isn't enough faith, it's the church leaders who lack it, not the person who's seeking prayer. See how that goes if a pastor ever puts that one on you.

And then I love the last bit. The last bit here is incredibly powerful. It's verse 16. I think when we first went to give this message a name, we were going to call it powerful and effective prayer.

And I've stepped away from that tonight because I think that's a bit nonsense too. And I'll tell you why. Because if we are a righteous man or woman or young person, however we want to describe ourselves, we are a righteous person because of the sheer grace of Christ and his gift to us.

He makes us righteous. We don't make ourselves righteous. If we're in Christ, we are righteous. He's done it all. Prayer involves humility, humble authenticity in terms of St Paul's values.

[ 19 : 52 ] So working through this passage, James says to us, if we're in trouble, we need help. If we're in good times, then don't forget God. Acknowledge the kindness and the goodness of God. If we're in serious illness, our need and dependence on God and others, ask other people for help.

But here at the end, also in failure. In failure, pray. How hard it is for us to go to a brother or sister, might be our mum and dad, might be our husband or wife, brother or sister, and humble ourselves and say, I am sorry for what I did to you.

Or someone at church, I am sorry that I gossiped about you. I said things about you which were not true. I delighted in talking about bad things about you.

I am sorry that I poured out my anger and my frustration against you. Please forgive me. Or brother, I need help.

I feel trapped in sin. I've been looking at pornography and I don't know how to stop. Or I've been abusive towards my wife or cold to my husband or filthy with my parents.

[ 21 : 22 ] I've been stealing at work or school. That's tough. Revealing ourselves to another person.

Putting ourselves at their mercy and also at the Lord's mercy. Taking the risk that they might take your confession and use it to hurt you.

It's very different from the corporate confession that we do in church. You know, often nearly every week at church we say a prayer where we acknowledge our sins as the body of Christ.

That's a great prayer to do, but it's general and it's safe. You can sit here in church and you can say that prayer without revealing anything about what is really going on inside you.

James is speaking about confession that is specific. Naming very specific sins brings them into the light and brings us to a place of healing.

[ 22 : 29 ] I have only ever known mercy from other believers when I have revealed personal weakness, as hard as it is, about myself to them and asked them for help.

Only once in nearly 40 years has that trust been misused. James says, verse 16, So I'm not saying to you tonight that you should go out and that you should blurt all your personal information and inner feelings to just anyone.

Because the truth is some people are not trustworthy and some people do gossip all over the place. But I think that James' vision is of Christian communities where we are praying all over the place with one another, where we are admitting specific offences against each other, where we are bringing hidden sin into the light so that we can be healed.

That's the type of vision of the church which he has. And so I want to challenge you and say that if you know that you have acted wrongly towards a brother or sister in Christ, that you go to them, that you admit it, and that you ask for their forgiveness.

And I also want to challenge you that if there is secret sin in your life that has a hold over you, that you go to someone you trust, maybe a leader, maybe somebody like Sam, and confess it and ask for any help that they can give you to keep putting it aside.

[ 24 : 21 ] James tells us that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. A righteous person? What's a righteous person? Someone like us who has been forgiven by the Lord Jesus Christ.

None of us is righteous by our own efforts. Our righteousness is the gift of our Heavenly Father. And then he uses the example of Elijah, and Elijah is one of the really great ones in the Old Testament. And he says, Elijah was a person just like us.

He prayed earnestly that it wouldn't rain and it didn't rain on the land for three and a half years. And again he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crop. He's telling us, really simply, that Elijah was a very ordinary person.

He was just like us. But God used his prayers in the most remarkable and powerful way. The picture of prayer here is of us calling on our Heavenly Father in every circumstance of life, expressing dependence on him in trials and difficulties, telling him our joys when things are going really well, looking to the leaders of our church when big sickness comes upon us, and being humble to admit failure and weakness, failure and wrong, when we've done stuff that we really shouldn't do, to be a body of people who show our dependence on each other and on Christ by confessing our sins.

I love the way that we pray in church. I also love the way that we pray with each other outside the service. When the service is over, how we sometimes stand in little groups, and you see heads down, somebody's listening to another and they're praying for each other.

[ 25 : 55 ] We're sharing joys, we're sharing concerns, we're sharing struggles, and together we're committing ourselves to our Heavenly Father in prayer. It's a joy and a privilege that he allows us to know him and one another in such wonderful ways.

Amen.