

Having a clean and close life with God

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[0 : 00] as we appreciate God's Word. If you'd like to turn your Bibles to Psalm 66. Psalm 66. Now, it's been a while since I have did a two-part message.

And so this is part one. Part two will be this evening. Part two will be more of a study because I would like some interaction on it. Part two will include Psalm 66, but we will be going to the New Testament counterpart of Psalm 66 in its meaning to deal with it.

But this morning we're going to look at Psalm 66 and the subject both this morning and this evening. So now hear God's Word.

Shout for joy to God, all the earth. Sing the glory of his name. Give him glorious praise. Say to God, how awesome are your deeds.

So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you. All the earth worships you and sings praises to you.

[1 : 21] They sing praises to your name. Come and see what God has done. He is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man.

He turned the sea into dry land. They passed through the river on foot. There did we rejoice in him who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations.

Let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Bless our God, O peoples. Let the sound of his praise be heard. Who has kept our soul among the living and has not let our feet slip?

For you, O God, have tested us. You have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net. You laid a crushing burden on our backs.

You let men ride over our heads. We went through fire and through water. Yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.

[2 : 28] I will come into your house with burnt offerings. I will perform my vows to you, that which my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.

I will offer to you burnt offerings of fattened animals with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams. I will make an offering of bulls and goats, Selah.

Come and hear all who fear the Lord, you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul. I cried to him with my mouth, and high praise was on my tongue.

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened. He has attended to the voice of my prayer.

Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me. Let's pray.

[3 : 33] Pray. Pray. Father God, your word, which is able to encourage, is also able to correct.

Your word, which is able to bring us assurance, is also complemented with the experiences of those assurances.

We would ask, Father God, this evening, this morning, as we read your word, that we would remember it for this evening as well, that we would appreciate that as we set this day apart for you and recognize that these matters are of great significance to the difference and the change that we can expect in the days ahead, but change only as it relates to your word and the rule of your word to the faithful one who follows it.

We would ask there, Father God, that as we present ourselves before you this morning to hear your word, we pray that it is your word that we hear and we would ask, Father God, that as we come to understand it, that we would recognize that this is a practical lesson, that we live a very practical Christian life and are called to on a daily basis.

We pray, Father God, for the difference that you can make to be made in our church and we pray, Father God, that our prayers would be answered, but we hear the conviction and the challenge here

and therefore, we're not presumptuous, but we bring ourselves before you recognizing that we are vessels to be filled and to be used and we are not an autonomous one in and of ourselves as though we can bring about any significant change.

[5 : 25] And so we ask you, Father God, this morning with the seriousness that it deserves to present yourselves amongst us so that our prayers may be heard in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Well, let me start by saying that both this morning and this evening, I'm going to be concentrating on the latter part of this psalm and then the New Testament counterpart of what it actually means.

The part that I will be focusing on in particular is verses 18 through to 20, which says, if I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

But truly, God has listened. He has attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.

Now, over the years, I've always tried to understand why Christians don't move beyond the good intentions that they have.

[6 : 29] In fact, in the very first year of being here, 2011, we arrived in 2010, in 2011, I ran a Monday evening course that ran for three nights, three Monday nights, and then a different group would come in, and the whole little study was moving beyond good intentions.

And we looked at the specifics of why it doesn't happen. Why do so many Christians fail to move beyond the good intention of, say, praying more?

Why does it get no further than just the intention? Or to give more, or to serve more? And prayer has also been one where I've tried to understand over the years, and as I began listening to people, I began to realize that actually it probably has very little to do with discipline or effort.

Now, as we come to this psalm, we need to understand first and foremost the background of why this man is, this psalmist, is calling us to sing praises to God, and the challenges, of course, when was the last time you ever said to someone, let's go and praise God?

The psalm is drawing your attention to the worthiness of God, and then secondly, the duty of man.

[8 : 01] The worthiness of God and the duty of man. How worthy is God to receive praise and honor and glory and worship? How worthy is God to receive all of that?

And you may say, well, of course he's worthy. It's a bit like asking a question in Sunday school and somebody saying, Jesus. Okay, you're never going to tell anyone off for coming up with Jesus because it's always the right answer.

But you're adults and therefore more is expected of you. Much more is expected of you. And therefore, if you are called, as this psalmist is saying, to shout for joy to the God or the earth, for you to give praise to the God, it depends, firstly, on you recognizing that God is both worthy and therefore recognizing that you are the one who has both the duty and hopefully the desire to give to God what belongs to God, that is, praise and worship.

And so, when was the last time that you, like the psalmist here, called someone and said, let's praise God together.

Let's give God praise for that answered prayer. Let's give God praise for this happening. Let's give God praise for his steadfast love.

[9 : 35] Let's give God praise for the future that we don't know what will be. And so, the qualification here is twofold.

The man is recognizing that in order to be able to recognize the worthiness of God or rather, in order to be able to sing praises to God, you first and foremost have to recognize the worthiness of God to receive such praise.

To praise God is to draw attention to his majesty. It is to draw attention to his greatness. And the reason why praise is lacking has very little to do with the discipline of being disciplined in praising God and more to do with the fact that people don't see why God is worthy.

In other words, it is a sight problem, not a discipline problem. Now, it may also be a discipline problem, but it is first and foremost a sight problem.

How do you know what to give thanks for if you don't know what to give thanks for? And so, what we see here in this psalm is a very clear structure broken up into three, and I only want to focus on the last part because this is the part of which the rest of the psalm is actually based on.

[11 : 02] This man can give these praises to God because his prayer has been answered, but he recognizes the conditional requirements that are needed for your prayers to be answered and why

your prayers are not being answered.

It's not that you're receiving no's, they're just not even being heard in the first place. So, here's the summary. Verses 1 through to 7, the psalmist is drawing your attention to the sovereignty of God over all creation, and this is the reason why God is worthy to receive praise and honor and glory from his people.

The sovereignty of God over all creation. Just look at the end of verse, or verse 3 in particular. Say to God, how awesome are your deeds, so great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you.

In other words, there's not a single part, verse 4, over all the earth worships you and sing praises to you. In other words, all the earth has to be qualified, but the earth itself that God has created is to the praise and glory of God.

And so what we have in these first seven verses is the worthiness of God to receive praise and honor and the sovereignty of God over all of his creation.

[12:27] Then in verses 8 through to 12, the attention is drawn to the people of God. Bless our God, O peoples. And so now the people of God are being addressed, they are being exhorted to praise God.

This is the exhortation that it is your duty in light of the worthiness of God and your desire as one created in the image of God to give God praise.

So we have the worthiness of God and the duty of man or rather the duty and desire of man, mankind, you as a person, to give God praise, to personally recognize what God has given to you and who God is and what God has done and then to respond to that sovereignty and worthiness with praise to him.

And then in verse 13 through to 20, we have the personal testimony of the psalmist. And this is sort of a bit like describing a building from the top down rather than from the foundation up.

So Psalm 66, what you're seeing is the first seven verses is like the very top of the building. And then halfway down the building, you have the exhortation towards the people.

[13:51] And then right down at the bottom, you have the foundation, which is, his prayer has been answered. And so everything is, all of his praise that is given to God is based on the fact that God is faithful and proven himself faithful in the fact that his prayer has been answered.

But more than that, so much more than that, because these last few verses speak to the testimony and experience of the psalmist. And this is where our focus needs to be this morning.

So we're focusing on verses 18 through to 20. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

But truly God has listened. He has attended the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.

Now, throughout the psalms, there is what's called a collective wisdom. That is that when you read enough of the psalms, you begin to understand that there's a wisdom in all of them in addition to the didactic psalms, which are clearly teaching psalms, clearly giving clear instruction.

[15:14] But here, throughout the psalms, you have a wisdom in the same way you have a wisdom here that must be learnt and appreciated and understood. And what that wisdom shows us is that experience is a counterpart, genuine biblical experience is a necessary counterpart to the promises that God has made.

And therefore, because of that, I no longer believe that the reason why Christians are not praying is because it's a discipline issue.

I don't think it's a discipline issue at all, or at least not as much as you might perhaps think it is. That it's a lack of commitment, that that's where the problem is.

I don't think that is where the problem is. I think, given the collective wisdom of the psalms, that if that is part of the problem, it is most definitely not all the problem.

And the part that I would like to focus on is the experiential part. Given that this psalm clearly teaches that it is possible for a person to pray and not even be answered by God, what does that then do to the person who is praying?

[16:39] I mean, let me put it a slightly different way. how long are you likely to continue to speak to a person when they don't answer you? How long will it be before you give up speaking to them when they never answer you?

I don't imagine it would be long. And so, the conclusion that we can draw is that if it is possible that you can speak to God in prayer and not be answered, then isn't it possible that one of the reasons Christians stop praying is not because they lack discipline or commitment, but rather because they are not being answered.

It's not a discipline issue. It's actually a sin issue. And the reason it's a sin issue because the only time God doesn't answer is when the person praying regards iniquity in their heart, cherishes sin in their heart.

It's the only time God doesn't answer. We know that without faith it's impossible to please God, so don't pray unless you have faith in God because it wouldn't make any sense to continue in that vein because you're not pleasing God that you're praying to.

That in itself is a sin. We also recognize that such a person can turn that knowledge into a justification for not praying like the man does in James chapter 1.

[18 : 30] who doesn't pray because he has worked out some kind of logical formula that says well, it wouldn't have happened anyway. God is sovereign so whatever was going to happen will happen and what doesn't happen doesn't happen so why pray anyway?

It isn't going to make any difference. And a man like that can convince himself not to pray on the basis that he believes that because God is sovereign prayer isn't going to make any difference. And so he does two things.

One, he undermines the word of God spoken to him that prayer is effectual and two, he is denying the very power of God that God is given through the means of prayer.

He undermines the gift and he undermines the gift in a couple of ways. Firstly, by rejecting it.

Secondly, by rejecting it because he undermines its effectiveness.

The prayer is not effectual. It doesn't actually change anything. And so what we begin to realize is that a person who is double-minded in all their ways is not only probably caught up in some sin of some kind but actually is not being answered either.

[19 : 46] God even tells such a man that he shouldn't expect to receive anything. The trouble is is such men do expect to receive. and then justify their practice of not praying on the basis that they've not received.

See, it doesn't make any difference. Why pray? Because it doesn't make any difference. And so suddenly you begin to realize that actually praying and not getting an answer is far deeper than it simply being a matter of discipline or commitment.

commitment. The issue actually has more to do with the condition of your heart before God that you pray to because when God listens, he's paying attention to the condition of your heart not just the words that you say.

Don't think that you will be heard because of your many words. It's not why you're heard. You're not heard because of the words you speak.

It's not the reason why you're heard. Those words are heard when your heart is right but that's not the reason why you are heard. And so if we take a psalm for instance like Psalm 34 verse 8 which says taste and see that the Lord is good.

[21 : 04] Taste and see that the Lord is good. We learn, don't we, that genuine experience is necessary, is a necessary counterpart to the Christian life. In other words, answered prayer is absolutely essential to encourage us to pray.

It is the necessary and experiential counterpart. Taste and see that the Lord is good. The psalmist is not just encouraging us to learn something, he's encouraging us to experience the change, to experience the difference of knowing God compared to knowing other things.

things. And so the genuine experience of prayer that God promises is answered prayer. It is natural in relationship with God for your prayers to be answered.

That is what you can expect, it is what you should expect. Now it is also possible that a person may even be sat here this morning and argue the fact that yeah my prayers are answered but they are always answered no.

That is not going to be true. It may be because you are praying for things selfishly or unrighteously or you are asking and seeking and knocking for things that are not beneficial to you and God knows what you need.

[22 : 38] So it is possible I guess that you could be praying for lots of things and as a byproduct there are more no's than yes. But that is not what this psalm is talking about.

The psalm isn't talking about you receiving the answer of no. What the psalm is addressing is you not even being answered. and so a person can say yes my prayers are answered but they're always no.

No. What this psalm is saying is when God doesn't even listen to you. And how important it is to be heard by God.

You want to be a praying church? You have to confess your sins all the time. And why do you have to confess your sins?

Because it will make a difference to your praying life. Why will it make a difference to your praying life? Because sin makes a difference to whether or not your prayer is even answered.

[23 : 43] in Psalm 1 which as you know is the first psalm in the Psalter and it's the one that sets the tone for the rest of the book.

And I've told on Psalm 1 a number of times in different contexts. But never lose the meaning of what Psalm 1. That the man in Psalm 1 who walks a close and clean life with God, who meditates on his law day and night, who speaks the word of God to himself.

That's what it actually means. To meditate on God's word day and night is actually to speak God's word to yourself. That's what it means. And the man who does that and walks a very close and clean life with God is like a tree planted by streams of living water that produces fruit.

fruit. And of course the illustration that we are given there because the Psalms are written for a community of people is for us to recognize one simple truth that we can recognize every time we see an apple fall off a tree.

That trees never ever eat their own fruit. What they produce is always for others. And so the very first Psalm is setting the context for the Psalter.

[25 : 14] That if you want to be a congregation that is fruitful you cannot be fruitful by yourself. And if you want to be a congregation that enjoys the blessings of God not only do you have to individually walk a very close and clean life with God but if you don't the people around you have no fruit to eat.

No blessing to enjoy. Because what your life produces is not for you it is for others. And so now as we come to Psalm 66 now we come back to this idea of having a close and clean life with God and if we go back to Psalm 1 we understand why it's so important.

Why it's so important that this Psalm begins with an exhortation to the people to praise God. You see the reason why Christians don't think their prayer life is quite as bad as what it actually is is because the people whose prayer life is non-existent are actually often in the company of people who pray a lot.

And so they get to enjoy all the fruit you produce but they themselves produce nothing for you. You know that because you can recognize it. But those they can never see it because they're too busy enjoying what you produce for them.

But have they ever produced anything for you today? today? And so now we begin to realize that this is a community issue, a congregational issue, a fellowship issue, not just an individual life before God that makes no difference to anybody else.

[27 : 09] No, it makes a huge difference to everybody else. And so the gathered wisdom in the Psalms allows us to understand that not only does the individual lose out but the individual can benefit by other people's prayers being answered and therefore deceive themselves that somehow their prayers are being answered when they're not.

What the psalmist is saying here, and this is where I sort of am going to draw it to an ever and ever tighter conclusion, is that there are visible and practical signs to answered prayer.

There are experiences that accompany answered prayer. The psalmist recognizes that if he has cherished sin in his heart, verse 18, if he has regarded sin in his heart, iniquity in his heart, then the Lord would not have said no, he just wouldn't have answered at all.

But then he goes on to say, but the Lord has heard me, which tells you what?

If this man is wise enough to recognize that if he cherishes iniquity in his heart, the Lord has not heard him, and then he has the boldness to say that the Lord has heard him, what is he identifying about his own heart?

[28 : 50] In fact, his very appeal to God is the fact that his heart is not full of iniquity, that he has in fact confessed that sin, and that God has not only heard his words but looked upon his heart and has answered his prayer.

prayer. And so what this man is actually receiving from God is God's testimony regarding the condition of his heart. Every time God answers your prayer, God is saying something about the condition of your heart.

And every time God doesn't, he is saying something about the condition of your heart. This is what the psalmist is saying.

And so the very visible and practical proof of prayer is the experience that follows, and the experience is, of course, answered prayer. God isn't just listening to the words that you say, but rather he is looking at the condition of your heart.

This is a man who knows what God pays attention to, and he knows what God is not paying attention to. And of course, this leaves us with two truths.

[30 : 10] The first is this, that if we regard sin in our heart, that is another way of saying that if we have any room in our life where we hold on to a sin, or any reason why we might cherish that sin because we enjoy the way it makes us feel, people, then God will not answer our prayer.

If we've not repented of those sins, then God's not going to say no, he's just not going to answer. And then secondly, as I've already said, that answered prayer is the testimony of the condition of your heart before God.

God, when God attends to the voice of your prayer, you have had a spiritual heart check. God is saying how well you have treated sin.

Have you treated sin with the seriousness it deserves? You see, answered prayer is normal for the Christian. It's not abnormal for God to answer your prayer.

Prayer is very normal for God to answer your prayer. The abnormality comes when your heart regards sin. And so I believe that the reason why people don't pray is not because it's an issue of discipline, it's actually because it's an issue of sin.

[31 : 41] Because how long can you continue to speak to someone when they don't answer you back? Well, this is what we should focus on then as we close.

Firstly, pay attention to what God pays attention to. God is not paying attention to the burden when you pray.

God is not paying attention to the circumstances that you're praying about. And God isn't really paying attention directly to the words that you're using.

As if you would be heard because of your many words, you won't. What God is actually paying attention to before all others is the condition of your heart.

And so confess your sin so that you may be heard by the Lord. Your sin is an offense to God. And why would God listen to someone who offends him?

[32 : 41] God is not to praise him. But here's the exhortation. This psalm clearly addresses the worthiness of God to be praised and the duty and desire of man to praise the God that he loves.

The God whom he loves. The God is not just concerned with the words that we use, but he's actually more concerned with our hearts desire, what we are cherishing.

Is it the Lord or is it something else? We are not allowed to call sin by another name. It was only a mistake. Or technically, I didn't really do that.

Where did technically come into sinning? Right? You know, I understand how words, I understand how words formulate.

I mean, I've spent ages learning a subject called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which I won't bore you with. I've actually spoken about this before.

[33 : 48] But words have meanings and meanings have power and so forth and so on. But someone said to me, Daniel, we recognize you're getting old because you now call computers machines.

That machine isn't working. It's not a machine, it's a computer. Right? Young people don't call computers machines, only old people do. Do you have a machine? Yeah.

Do you ever call it a machine? No? Well, then you're a young bunch. That's all I can say. We're not allowed to call sin by another name.

We're not allowed to say it's a mistake. We're not allowed to say, well, technically, we're not allowed to do that. We're equivocating our responsibility to repent of the sin that we've actually committed.

If you want to be a praying church, or rather, if you want to be a church that has their prayers answered, then you have to be a church that confesses your sins.

[34 : 56] sin. And you have to be a church, therefore, that recognizes where it is that you are sinning. Because James is quite clear, isn't he, that you can sin by not doing the right thing, or doing the wrong thing.

You can sin by commission, or actually doing it, or omission. not doing the thing that you are meant to do, and doing the thing that you're not meant to do.

You can also sin by what I would call redefining the terms of somebody else's. Where you know that another person is sinning, and yet you don't address it.

And yet you're called in James, aren't you, that if a brother wanders away from the truth, you ought to reach out and bring them back. And then we say things like, yeah, but they're happy. They finally got someone.

They're settling down, they're getting married, they're happy. That's sin, isn't it? Because you're failing to do the very thing that you're meant to do. And then you go to the prayer meeting and think, well, God will answer me.

[36 : 14] No, he won't. Why would he? I was so moved by Gavin's message last evening that it set the tone for this message because he was absolutely right.

That why can the church expect anything, any of the blessings that God promises unless we first and foremost come and get our act together before a holy God?

God, we can't. And so you want to be a praying church? Be a church that confesses their sins.

Why? Because answered prayer, answered prayer is the testimony of the condition of your heart.

Remember that. Answered prayer, which is normal for the Christian, is a testimony for the condition of your heart. Amen.

Amen. And forever more, in Jesus' name. Amen.