

Praying

Our Family Values:

Matthew 7:7-11

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The other day I read this song and prayer in the Bible. Psalm 44 reads:

We have heard with our ears, O God; our fathers have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago. With your hand you drove out the nations and planted our fathers; you crushed the peoples and made our fathers flourish. (Psalm 44:1-2, NIV)

The Israelites drove out seven nations that were better armed and greater in number than them. It was no small feat. God answered their prayers. Psalm 44 continues:

It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them. (Psalm 44:3, NIV)

No skill brought down the wall of Jericho in the Promised Land. If it was skill, how could Israel be defeated and devastated by the few people living in a village called Ai. The Psalm continues:

You are my King and my God, who decrees victories for Jacob. Through you we push back our enemies; through your name we trample our foes. I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory; but you give us victory over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame. In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever. (Psalm 44:4-8, NIV)

Although this Psalm makes it clear that God is the key to victory, God is not showing Israel favor when this song and prayer is written. Listen:

But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies. You made us retreat before the enemy, and our adversaries have plundered us. You gave us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations. You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale. (Psalm 44:9-12)

It appears that God is not answering the prayers of his people. The Psalm continues:

You have made us a reproach to our neighbors, the scorn and derision of those around us. You have made us a byword among the nations; the peoples shake their heads at us. My disgrace is before me all day long, and my face is covered with shame at the taunts of those who reproach and revile me, because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge. (Psalm 44:13-16, NIV)

There is such pain in these words. There is desperation. These praying people are looking to God to change their situation. Do they think they deserve this treatment? Listen:

All this happened to us, though we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant. Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path. But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals and covered us over with deep darkness. (Psalm 44:17-19, NIV)

These folks are scratching their heads and wanting to know why they are not tasting God's love and favor. Why isn't he answering their prayers? The song continues:

If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart? Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? (Psalm 44:20-24, NIV)

This is authentic prayer. It carries no secret formula or special knowledge. It is honest and it identifies God as the answer. It presses God for an answer. The Psalm concludes:

We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up and help us; redeem us because of your unfailing love. (Psalm 44:25-26, NIV)

This is the cry of faith. It is much like the scene after Lazarus's death when his sister Mary fell at Jesus' feet. Weeping bitterly, she cried:

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. (John 11:32, NIV)

In this scene Mary models a prayer of faith. She focuses on Jesus as her answer. Our answers are not in the government. They are not in the medical community. They are not in education or the development of our skills. Our victories do not come when we figure out the devil or his principalities. Jesus is our answer. If we believe this, then we spend our life differently. If we truly believe in God's love and power, then why would we not grab hold of Jesus' feet in prayer and not let go until we have his answer?

In Matthew 7, Jesus told us to pray because it makes a difference. He did not tell us to pray because we will be a better people or have a better relationship with God. He said:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8, NIV)

The motive for praying is the answer. We really have some good ideas and good desires. It is not a bad thing to want provision, health, shelter, justice or blessing. Jesus wants us to pray so that we will experience many of the things God puts in our heart. Jesus goes further. God is your father and wants to respond to your requests and your needs. He won't rebuke you for asking. The truth is our asking is critical to receiving. Our persistence in asking is critical to discovering why we are hurting. Our honesty in asking is necessary for a real relationship.

There are times when God won't answer prayers, but unless we ask about it, all we do is lose faith. Ever since one of my Christian friends lost his young child to disease, he has not boldly prayed for healing. Instead, he asks for God's best will, whatever it is; but God wants us to press in for the things on our hearts, so that we actually learn and receive his blessings. Prayer is not a formula that lends itself to scientific studies that try to validate or deny its power. Instead, pray is honest communication with the one who holds the solutions to our needs.

I know we have a prayer chain, prayer groups, prayer teams and various prayer ministries; but I don't think we are where God wants us to be. We do hold as a core value praying:

We value prayer as the gift through which we communicate with God and through which God supplies our needs and accomplishes His will.

God has given us this amazing gift of prayer. How we suffer if we don't use it! Some 150 years ago, Joseph Scriven wrote:

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

The power of prayer is so vital, so fundamental, so essential, and so universal, that it, rather than our efforts or abilities, is key to our provision – *give us this day our daily bread*. Your prayer is key to your experience of God's favor rather than Satan's torment – *thy kingdom come*. Our prayer is key to God's will becoming reality – *thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*.

Since God gave us human beings rule of this earth, many have concluded that God does nothing on this earth except in answer to our prayers. When we don't see God's favor and power, we are to pray until our hearts are at rest with God's merciful answers. Sometimes, this means praying privately. Sometimes, this means assembling together to pray, to fast, weep and hold vigil. Sometimes, God leads us into acts of repentance, and sometimes God leads us into deeper and greater faith.

When I lived and served as a pastor in rural Minnesota, I drove traveled roads day and night. I found myself and my car executing judgment on God's creation. At first I was relieved when my car didn't sustain damage, but then something happened in my heart. I wondered why I, an ambassador of Christ, was bringing death to so many critters. I was to bring God's

redeeming love to creation. (I wasn't thinking about bugs. I didn't mind lessening their numbers a bit.) I began to pray. "Lord, this can't please you. I'm not here to cause this carnage with animals." If I drove slow enough to avoid road-kill, I'd be a hazard to others and not accomplish my work. After I began praying, I did not hit another creature the remainder of my time there. In fact, often I felt warned in my spirit and I would cry out for God to clear the road for me and protect his creation. One time traveling on US 52 by Canon Falls, I felt we were going to hit a deer. An unusual dread came upon me because I felt there would be more consequences than just a deer. We were in traffic. When I get those feelings, I normally see the animal. There are very few times when I don't later see the animal. I had my passengers join me in prayer because I couldn't get peace. Soon the feeling lifted and our drive was again uneventful... as it has been for more than a dozen years. That's a miracle, isn't it!

Today, I wonder what am I missing because I'm not praying. What are we missing because we don't really go after some things in prayer? Would we see more healing? Have some people died prematurely or continued in illness because we haven't broken through some barriers that could be eliminated by prayer? To what degree have our personal and corporate struggles been needless because we haven't gone after the answer in prayer? Could our family, church, community and nation be struggling in certain ways because we don't pray the price?

I believe Jesus, don't you? "Ask and it will be given to you," he says. How much of our life will we spend asking in prayer? According to the prayer Jesus taught us, the reverence of God's name, the presence of God's kingdom, the execution of God's will, our provision, our forgiveness, our trials depend on it. I believe Jesus, do you?