

PRAYER – The Behavior of Belief

Pastor Mary Scheer, Brewster Baptist Church, 4/29/2007

Today we are in the book of Acts. Acts looks at what happened after Jesus ascended into Heaven. It tells us about the coming of the Holy Spirit, the birth of the Church and the power of prayer in the lives of believers.

Our Text continues with Ch. (1:14 and 2:45-47)

“They all met together continually for prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women and the brothers of Jesus...(1:14) A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together constantly and shared everything they had. They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in their homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity – all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved. (2:45-47)

The book of Acts is filled with stories of drama, fighting, betrayal, murder, shipwrecks, imprisonment and earthquakes. There were miracles, deliverance, sickness healed, a dead girl raised back to life and other stories that illustrate the power of prayer. Belief is demonstrated by behavior and the believers prayed their way through trials of various kinds. They risked death for preaching the Gospel. And the whole world was changed as a result of their faith, their prayers and their actions.

Last month early on a dark and foggy morning, I was heading to the base for a drill weekend. The road was slick and it was difficult to see much past my headlights. I was praying while I drove along. As I approached the bridge section just past exit 6, I thought I saw something sideways in the road and began to tap my breaks to slow down. It was then that I hit a patch of black ice. It felt like there was nothing under my tires. With no traction and no breaks, I was barreling straight for whatever was in front of me. I was in the left lane and as I got closer I realized it was a car sitting sideways in the road. In fact there were at least three cars that had already crashed in front of me. I kept tapping my breaks but if I kept going straight I’d hit them. So I tried to steer to the right a bit to aim for the guard rail and avoid a front end impact. But I began to slide and in a moment realized I had no control over my vehicle, it was doing its own thing. But suddenly my car slowed down, slid perfectly into place in a pocket opening of other cars that were also approaching the crash. I came to a stop safely without hitting anything. But just as I stopped other cars from behind me came up that hill and hit the cars in front of them. After a while, the police were finally able to get past the backed up traffic, sort out and move the cars. As paramedic crews were working in front of me, an officer told me to drive backwards down the road and backwards down the ramp that had been closed. I said, “no way, I’m not driving backwards in this.” He said, “you can do it, you’re a good driver, look, you’re the only car around here that didn’t crash!” But I was thinking, it wasn’t me, it was God, because I was praying. I’ve spent some time since that morning thinking about prayer.

Did I avoid a crash that morning because I had been praying??? Was I the only person in that group who had prayed? If God heard and answered my prayer that day, what about all the other times when it felt like he didn’t?

A little later in this sermon, I am going to tell you how prayer can change your life and why you can’t live without it, but first I want to take a look at some of the challenges we may face when we pray.

1. The 1st Challenge is Disappointment with Prayer: Prayer can be a challenge when we feel like God's not listening.

INTRO: MOVIE CLIP "BRUCE ALMIGHTY": In the movie "Bruce Almighty," Jim Carry's character Bruce is having a bad day, It starts as soon as he gets up when his dog is confused about where the bathroom is, he misses a meeting because he's stuck in traffic, he doesn't get the promotion he thought was in the bag, has a bad reaction to this news and loses his job altogether, he gets beat up after trying to protect a homeless person from a group of thugs, he fights with his girlfriend and finally at the end of his rope, he gets in his car, grabs some prayer beads that his girlfriend had given him earlier and turns to God in prayer. (Play Clip Here)

Prayer can be disappointing when we've prayed everything we know how to pray about an issue and nothing happens or don't get what we asked for: It can be hard to get excited about prayer when you don't think anyone is listening.

Have you ever prayed for something, prayed with all your heart and things didn't work out the way you were hoping?

I had a friend who needed a double lung transplant...she and her husband had three young children and she was the glue in her family. A graduate of Moody Bible College, she was a woman of faith. Her love for the Lord was evident to all who knew her, and we all marveled at her calm assurance that God would take care of her while waited on the transplant list. Finally a miracle happened and she learned she would receive her lungs and be home in time for Thanksgiving. But before she could have the surgery some of the meds she was taking caused a bloody nose that could not be controlled and had to be cauterized. That procedure went fine, but the meds she was given for the procedure caused her heart to speed up dangerously, so they gave her something to make it slow down and it slowed down and stopped. She died. I remember exactly where I was when I got the call. I could not believe it, I had prayed, we all prayed, the whole church had prayed...I was so mad.

Another friend found out towards the end of her pregnancy that she had advanced liver cancer. She died 3 days after giving birth. Because the baby's father was not in the picture, before she died she asked a mutual friend of ours to consider raising her baby. But that friend, who was my maid of honor at our wedding died too after just a few months later from breast cancer.

Then, I had a friend who graduated from seminary with me. He started his own church and attendance quickly rose. But then he had a stomach ache and learned he had stomach cancer that had spread beyond treatment. I prayed, everyone prayed. I was with him the day before he died an excruciating death. I could not believe it.

Then a couple months later, I stood around the hospital bed of another friend with her family and prayed, but she died anyway.

These were times when it felt like my prayers made no difference, like God wasn't listening or didn't care. Disappointment in prayer is the first challenge.

2. Confusion in Prayer is the second: *Confusion in prayer can happen when we don't know what to say, when we can't hear what God has to say, or we lose our focus and our mind wanders.*

- **We don't know what to say:** Have you ever tried to pray about something but you just weren't sure what to say? Has there ever been a situation so overwhelming to your senses that there were just no words? When the folks I cared about kept dying one after another, I remember going to God and just sort of standing there with nothing to say. I had already said it all, there were no words left. That's when the promise of Romans 8:26 is comforting. It says that when we don't know what to pray for or how to pray the Holy Spirit intercedes for us presenting our requests to God.
- **We can't hear what God has to say:** One time when I was young, I saw on tv a clip of people praying at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. I told my mom, "That's how it feels sometimes when I pray...like I'm talking to a wall." She said, "that's because you haven't learned to recognize God's voice."
 - God does still speak, but we don't always recognize or understand him.
 - Learning to recognize the difference between God's voice and your own internal voice is the first step.
 - It's hard though when we've never heard God's voice out loud. For instance, when I think or read something, I hear it in my head in my own voice.
 - But, if I recall a conversation, or read a quote from someone whose voice I've heard with my ears, I would hear it in my head in their voice.
 - Recall the voice of someone you know, you hear them in your head like they sound with their accent and all. For instance when my sister or my husband calls me they don't have to introduce themselves because I recognize their voice.
 - Well, we can't do this for God because none of us has ever heard him audibly with our ears.
 - So, whatever we "hear" from God, whatever thoughts come into our mind as prompted by the Holy Spirit are going to sound like our own voice!
 - What we have to "recall" are his words through Scripture and the prompting of the Holy Spirit.
 - But for this to be really helpful to us, we have to learn the Word. The written word is the language of God.
 - How can we understand if we don't speak the language? That would be like God speaking a foreign language that I don't understand, yeah he's talking but we can't tell what he's saying.
 - So...it's crucial that we learn the Scriptures so when the Holy Spirit brings a word to our mind.
 - *He speaks through the Word*, by bringing a Scripture to our mind that speaks to our situation.
 - *He speaks by directing our thoughts*. He prompts our thinking. We suddenly think of something we had not considered before. We have new insight and new ideas.
 - *He speaks through the circumstances in our lives*. One person said, "I pray and coincidences happen."
 - *He speaks through other believers*
 - **Caution:** Keep a journal. Write your prayers down and what whatever thoughts you have while you're praying. Always test what you think or hear from other people to see whether it is indeed from God.
- **What about when our mind wanders:** Have you ever lost track of what you were talking about while you were praying? The most helpful thing you can do is have a notebook and a pen with you when you pray. Someone once said, "if your mind wanders in prayer, follow it, God may be leading it somewhere." If it helps to keep your prayer requests with you when you pray that's fine.

3. Being Patient in Prayer is the third area of challenge: You've heard the Scripture promise that God is slow to anger, that's a good thing. But Sometimes it feels like God is slow to answer, and that's a bad feeling, especially if we were in a crisis and need help right away. Sometimes it feels like he comes to the rescue, but it's just in the "nick of time." My friend said, "My prayers feel like cliff hangers, is God against answering prayers early preferring to watch me sweat it out?" The Bible is full of stories of people praying in desperate situations that God will intervene in time.

Remember the children of Israel during the Exodus when they were running for their lives from the Egyptian Army and found themselves trapped against the Red Sea. They were sure they were about to be over run, but in the nick of time, God parted the Red Sea giving them a miraculous way of escape.

God is not slow as some of us might think. His timing is perfect and purposeful.

Chapters 9 and 10 in the book of Daniel take a peek behind the curtain of a few of Daniel's prayers and show us why his answers took time.

Daniel said, "As I was praying, Gabriel, whom I had seen in the earlier vision, came swiftly to me at the time of the evening sacrifice. He explained to me, "Daniel, I have come here to give you insight and understanding. The moment you began praying a command was given. I am here to tell you what it was, for God loves you very much. Now listen so you can understand the meaning of your vision." (9:20-23)

He explained the vision. "Then he said, don't be afraid Daniel, since the first day you began to pray for understanding and to humble yourself before God, your request has been heard in heaven. I have come in answer to your prayer. But for 3 weeks the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia blocked my way. Then Michael one of the archangels, came to help me. (10:12-14a)

A look behind Daniel's prayers shows us that we often don't know what's going on in the spiritual realm when we pray. Yet from the first day Daniel began to pray an answer was given.

Disappointment, Confusion and a lack of patients in prayer can lead to prayer fatigue causing us to doubt the power of prayer.

But there are also times when the answers to prayer can be immediate, profound, even shocking.

A little girl, dressed in her Sunday best, was running to church as fast as she could, trying not to be late for Sunday School. As she ran she prayed, "Dear Lord, please don't let me be late!"

As she was running and praying, she tripped on a curb and fell, getting her clothes dirty and tearing her dress. She got up, brushed herself off, and started running again. As she ran she prayed, "Dear Lord, please don't let me be late!...But don't shove me either."

While God's never shoved me, I have had answers to prayers that range from the ordinary to extraordinary.

After we had been out to visit this church and I was praying about the call to come here. I believed this was God's will, but I asked God to confirm that this was indeed his leading. I could not accept this position, ask my husband to quit his job, and move my family half way across the country unless I was absolutely certain. Into my mind popped the thought, "before the day is

through I will make a deer pass before your eyes. This is how you will know that I have called you to this place and I am with you.” Wow, ok weird thought, but then I thought well, why not, God can do anything.

So naturally, I went to the window and looked all around for a deer. I watched for a while and nothing. So...I decided to go for a drive. He said he would make a deer pass in front of my face but he didn't say I had to sit home and wait for it. So, I drove around....nothing. I couldn't believe it, we lived in the country where the deer were plentiful, but all I could find were the plastic ones being displayed on people's lawns. When I got tired of driving around town, I drove to the picnic area of our local forest preserve. I thought I'd make it easy on God, surely he could scare one out of the bush...nothing! Slowly it began to dawn on me that maybe it wasn't God who put that thought in my mind, perhaps it was my own wishful thinking. So I went home. Later that night Dave and I went to visit and have dinner with some friends. It was a long drive and on the way home I drifted in and out of sleep. All at once I woke up because the car had stopped, when I asked why we stopped Dave said we stopped because there were deer in the road. About 4 of them and as I watched they crossed the road, angling right by the passenger side as they continued down the road. One by one each deer sort of paused in front of my window looking me right in the eye. I couldn't believe it. Quick, I said, what time is it? 11:30 Dave said. And I remembered the words that ran through my mind earlier that day that said, “before the day is through I will make a deer pass before your eyes and then you will know that I have called you to this place and I am with you.” God had confirmed his leading our family to this church.

Through Proverbs 3:5, God says to us, “Trust in me with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding, but in all your ways acknowledge me (meaning, in every situation that you face, talk to me about it), and I will direct your path.” And, Isaiah 30:19b and 21 says, “...How gracious he will be when you cry for help. As soon as he hears, he will answer you...whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it.”

Prayer is so important that even God prayed. While Jesus was on this earth he prayed often.

Sometimes people think there's certain ways to pray, certain places or times that are better than others. Yet Jesus and his Disciples prayed at all different times and in a variety of settings.

They prayed at...

9am (Acts 2:15); **12 noon** (Acts 10:9); **3pm** (Acts 3:1; 10:30); **12 midnight** (Acts 16:25); **Continually** (1Thess. 5:17); **On all occasions** (Eph. 6:18); **At all times** (Ro. 1:10);

They prayed...

In their rooms (Mt. 6:6); **At the Temple** (Lk. 18:10; Acts 12:5); **At each others houses** (Acts 1:14; 12:12); **By the mountains** (Lk. 6:12); **In a garden** (Mt. 14:32); **On a beach** (Acts 21:5); **In a solitary place** (Mk. 1:35); **In prison** (Acts 16:25); **Looking toward heaven** (Jn. 17:1); **On a boat** (Acts 27:29); **At the river** (Acts 16:13); **On a roof** (Acts 10:9); **In the city** (Acts 11:5); **On their knees** (Acts 9:40; 20:36); **Stephen prayed while being stoned** (Acts 7:59); **They watched and prayed** (Mk 14:38); **Fasted and prayed** (Acts 14:23); **and sang and prayed** (Acts 16:25)

Through prayer they...

Were joined with other believers (Acts 3:1; Lk. 11:2); **Healed the sick** (Acts 28:8; Jas. 5:15); **Resisted temptation** (Mk 14:38); **Gained wisdom and made decisions** (Eph 1:18; 6:19; Acts

1:24; Phil. 1:9); **Seized opportunity** (Ro. 1:10; Col. 4:3); **Were filled with the Holy Spirit** (Acts 4:31); **Strengthened by the Holy Spirit** (Eph. 3:16); **Deepened their faith** (Eph. 3:17); **Gained courage** (Eph 6:19); **Were delivered from danger** (2Thess. 3:2); **Raised the dead** (Acts 9:40); **Survived storms** (Acts 27:29); **Dealt with anxiety** (Phil 4:6); **Confessed Sin** (Jas. 5:16); **And Gave thanks** (Col. 1:3).

Prayer has been the power that fueled the church and the lives of the believers from the earliest days.

Here is why you and I cannot live without prayer:

- 1) Because as humans we are limited in our capabilities. We have limited wisdom, limited understanding and less power and control than we often think we have.
 - 2) We were not made to live apart from the power of God. Prayer is the plug that connects us to God, to the creator and sustainer of the universe, to our source of power.
 - 3) And there are several life changing benefits of prayer.
- **Peace:** When we pray we connect with God. Something powerful happens when we get alone with God in prayer, when we take the time to slow down and focus. There's a connection, an awareness...that's when you tap into the "peace that transcends all understanding." This is the kind of peace that changes you. Even when the situation hasn't changed, you feel calmer and more assured. For this to happen we have to stay in prayer long enough to connect. We should not expect this to be the outcome of our ten second prayers while sitting at a stop light. I'm talking about being with God in prayer, waiting in prayer. You'll know it when it happens because the physical feelings that you brought with you to prayer will change and you will have an awareness that you are not alone and regardless of what's happening His presence transcends your problem.
 - **Wisdom:** If you've ever had a problem you couldn't solve, or a difficult choice to make and you needed wisdom, there is no wisdom that the world will ever be able to offer greater than the wisdom of God. The book of James says that if ask God for wisdom, he will give it to us.
 - **Healing:** Only through prayer can we realize the healing God offers that reaches beyond the limits of modern medicine and counseling. Jeremiah calls it the balm of Gilead which can heal both heart and soul.
 - **Strength:** Through the news we learn about one crisis in the world after another, situations (like natural disasters; accidents or intentional killing), situations for people that are so awful and horrible we can't even imagine. Only through prayer can we find the kind of strength needed to face the unthinkable and power to handle the unbelievable.
 - **Understanding:** When you pray you talk to someone who completely understands you, loves you unconditionally and actually knows what you want and need better than you do. No one on this earth will ever know or understand you better than the one who made you.
 - **Forgiveness:** Unconfused sin, sin that is not dealt with will make you sick!! Carrying around guilt and shame will destroy the soul. We are not meant to live with it and many crumble under the weight of it and wind up sick in mind and body. Through prayer we can have forgiveness, healing and a fresh start.

- **Comfort and Support:** There are times when pain can run so deep that your soul needs a hug. Humans can hug your shoulders, but God can hug your soul. When you hear the kind of words no one ever wants to hear like...I don't love you any more, "I'm leaving," Or the doctor says, "I'm sorry, there's nothing else we can do." When you've made difficult decisions, said difficult goodbyes and experience pain or grief that seems to flood every cell in your body...there is a kind of comfort and support that comes only as we connect with God through prayer. When we connect on this level we connect to the purest, perfect source of love. When the soul hurts, this is the only power strong enough to comfort at the deepest levels.
- **Overcoming the barriers of Space and Time:** Obviously, we can only be in one place at one time. Prayer is a way we can offer to help our friends and family who far away. This is huge for me, as a mother I am comforted by the fact that through prayer I can still help my kids even when they are out of my reach and my sight. Even if I can't be with my kids, God can and I know he loves them even more than I do and that he watches over them. For me the greatest feelings of helplessness are tied to parenting, especially as the kids became adults and moved out on their own. Sometimes it's a thrill to watch them make decisions, sometimes it's terrifying. I thought it was supposed to get easier as they got older, yet in many ways it's harder because I have less power and control than I once imagined I had. But through prayer I am reassured that God's love and care spans the distance I cannot cover.

Life is full, with busy schedules, social activities, relationships and other things that may lead us to think that we don't have time to pray. But if we could pull back the curtain and see what happens in the spiritual realm when we pray - if we could visibly see God looking at us while we talk with him - if we believe that every prayer makes a difference, we would drop everything and pray.

Abraham prayed...Isaac prayed...Jacob prayed...Moses left Pharaoh and prayed...Samson prayed...Hanna wept and prayed...David prayed...Elijah and Elisha prayed...Job prayed...Hezekiah prayed...Daniel got down on his knees and prayed...from inside the fish Jonah prayed...Very early in the morning, Jesus got up, and went off to a quiet place and prayed...and the believers...Acts says they joined together and prayed.

Because prayer is the unifying, empowering, encouraging, comforting, life changing, behavior of belief!

I'd like to ask you to join me now in reaffirming your commitment to making prayer a priority every day.

LET'S PRAY: Dear Lord, When we think about how Holy and righteous you are, how huge you are as the Creator of all that is, it can be hard to imagine that we not only have access, but that you invite us to come and talk with you. I hate to think of what we miss out on the times when we think we are too busy to pray. Help us through the times when we have felt disillusioned or disappointed with prayer. Help us to embrace the mystery of prayer that transcends our understanding. Help us to seek you with fresh urgency, making our time with you a priority. Lord, we pray for our sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, that you will draw them by your Spirit to yourself. Hear their prayers, empower them to grow into men and women dedicated to prayer. While some here today are seasoned prayer warriors who've been praying for years and years, for others it's a newer behavior. But whether it's been years and years, or we're just

beginning, we want to affirm or reaffirm our commitment to prayer. Help us to keep this commitment, prompt us if we slack and bless our efforts and encourage our growth with prayer. In Jesus Name. Amen.

BENEDICTION: Before I offer the final blessing, I'd like to remind you of the two upcoming opportunities for prayer:

- The National Day of Prayer Service This Thursday May 3rd at 7pm.
- And the Seminar on Prayer May 11-12.

For the blessing, I'd like to offer Paul's Prayer for the Ephesians:

For this reason I kneel before the father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted, and established in love, may have power together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep, is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations, forever and ever, Amen. (Eph. 3:16-21)