

The prophets and prayer

Teacher Yvon Prehn

Review and overview

- We're going to jump into the middle of a class I've been teaching on We've been studying the Minor Prophets and are near the end.
- 4 left: Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
- Next week a wonderful illustration of prayer in Habakkuk's conversation with God—honest, anguished
- In him we see a pattern of asking, listening, then sharing God's message with the people
- Though not always as clear as Habakkuk's will be, prayer was very important to the prophets and it should be to us.

Obviously many approaches to the study of prayer

- As I studied prayer and the prophets, and throughout the whole Bible (something we should always do when we study any topic)
- One thing that jumps out is that in contrast to the passages often pulled out of context such as....
- *"You may ask for anything in my name and I will do it"* John 14:4
- That many passages on prayer are conditional on how we live out our relationship to God; how we reflect that
- I'll get to specific verses in a minute but consider this as a basis for what we will go over....

Christianity is a relationship, not a religion

- In a religion, you must say the right words, repeat the right actions of devotion at the right times to please the supposed "god" you serve.
- E.g. in Islam the format of how and when you pray is what is important 5 x a day, facing east, praying a certain script
- In a relationship you converse anytime, anyplace
- A pre-rehearsed script would be completely out of place in a conversation with a real person... "oh wonderful husband...."
- In Christianity we have a RELATIONSHIP with the living God made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus

That's why He tells us.....

- Don't worry about anything, instead, pray about everything. Tell God your needs and don't forget to thank him for his answers.
- Pray without ceasing.
- So far, so good, but then the question always comes up, why aren't prayers answered?
- If we can talk to God and it's a relationship what is the problem?
- Answer is really clear (maybe not always what we want, but clear) when we think about it

Example of earthly, parent-child relationships

- Take the example of a loving Father who wants his child

to do well, to be kind and good, moral and generous, to grow up to be all he is intended to be, to represent the family well.

- Imagine also that the child in this example is a selfish little brat, who hits others and is proud of it; who won't share his toys, who is an embarrassment to the family when they are out in public.
- The child comes to the Father and asks for a new bicycle. The father knows his old one is broken and the child could really use a new bike, but because of the child's current behavior, do you think the Father should give him the new bicycle?
- Of course not.

Why should we expect God to act differently?

- If an earthly Father will withhold something from a naughty child until the child is sorry for his behavior and acts differently, why would our heavenly Father who is interested in not only our earthly good, but forever good be any different?
- So then, as we study prayer, to answer the question of why God does not answer prayer, it might be helpful to look at God's definition of what is the kind of life-style behavior that God clearly says is a roadblock to answered prayer.

Don't worry about perfection

- There is a danger as we look at these verses to think of God as a heavenly bully, looking down and waiting to smack anyone who deviates from His standard and who gloats over the idea that He doesn't have to answer prayers because we mess up on a little thing.
- Nothing could be further from the truth.
- God sets a high standard for us because of His great love for us, but at the same time he rewards the smallest of steps towards Him. From the father who said to Jesus, "Lord I believe, help my unbelief" To God answering Gideon who needed a fleece to believe God's message when an angel has appeared to him. Really..... But God is gracious to his struggling children.
- We all so the same when we are with the children we love who may be naughty, but who really want to do well. A while back when I was babysitting my adopted grandson, we had a little Bible reading before bed and then I asked what I could pray for him this week. He answered, "Pray I don't hit other kids this week."
- One other time we were in the candy store and accidentally he knocked a soda bottle off the shelf, it fell to the floor and broke. I was standing nearby and he ran to me in tears, threw his arms around me, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" he sobbed—the store clerk saw it and said the bottle was in the wrong place. It was all OK, but my grandson felt so bad and was truly repentant for his actions.
- He's a little guy in first grade and full of onery little boyness— hitting classmates and making messes are part

of life. He isn't perfect, but he has a very tender heart and he tries very hard to be good.

- Do you think I will wait for perfection before I love him and give him what he asks for if I'm able?
- The Lord treats us in the same way.

Because we want to please God, let's look at his expectations and how they relate to prayer

- Overall reason why prayers are not answered: PERSISTENT Sin in our lives:
Ps. 66:18 If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.
- Cherishing sin, means to dwell on it, be proud of it, not wanting to stop the sin, no repentance, "this is just how I am."
- So let's look now at some specific sins that the Bible ties to unanswered prayers.

Acting presumptuously against God's command

- Historical background here: After leaving Egypt the people refused to believe God and go into the land, God judged them and then they tried to go in and were soundly defeated.
- Deut. 1:43 Although I told you, you would not listen. You rebelled against the command of the LORD and presumptuously went up into the hill country. 44 The Amorites who lived in that hill country then came out against you and chased you as bees do. They beat you down in Seir as far as Hormah. 45 When you returned and wept before the LORD, the LORD would neither heed your voice nor pay you any attention.
- This is a scary passage because "do overs" not always possible or without great cost

Ignoring God's repeated warnings

- Prov. 1:23 Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.24 Because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,25 and because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof,26 I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you,27 when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.28 **Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.** 29 Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD,30 would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof,31 therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices.
- Sometimes God allows people to reap what they sow
- Be obedient when you first are convicted of a sin

Showy public worship that ignores the needs of the poor and oppressed

- Isa. 1:11 What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt

offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.v12 When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; 13 bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.15 **When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen;** your hands are full of blood.16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; **cease to do evil,17 learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.**

- It's how we treat the less fortunate that God cares about, not showy religious services.

More on the same topic, repeated by the prophets

- Zec. 7:9 Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another;10 do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.11 But they refused to listen, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears in order not to hear.12 They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets. **Therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts.13 Just as, when I called, they would not hear, so, when they called, I would not hear, says the LORD of hosts,**
- Prov. 21:13 If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard.
- God will treat people as they treat others

Not only ignoring the poor, but gossip and judging a cause for prayers not being answered

- Isa 58:5 Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
- 9 **Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.11 The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a**

watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

- Great promises that God will not only listen to your prayers, but will guide you, satisfy your needs and honor you.

After we examine our hearts confess our sins and do all we can to be pleasing to God, prayers still may not be answered.

Here are some reasons why:

- **For a greater purpose than we will ever see on earth or ever be able to understand in this life**
- Job 42:1 Then Job answered the LORD: 2 "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 3 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
- Job had no idea why he was tested, what was going on in heaven or the impact of his life.
- God's greater purpose was often the case with prophets also and we'll see this especially next week in Habakkuk.

That we might learn to rely on God despite all outward circumstances

- 2 Cor. 12: 7 Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.⁸ Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,⁹ but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.
- Limitations truly can be a gift

Not asking; asking with wrong motives

- Matt 7:7 "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.
- Ezekiel 22:30 **And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. 31 Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them.**
- James 4:2 **You do not have, because you do not ask.** 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.
- God wants us to ask so that it will be apparent the source of answers. If we don't ask (and this is why a prayer journal can be helpful) we won't link our prayers to God's answers.

Should be obvious, but what then are the requirements for answered prayers?

- If Sin is a key problem, Contrition, sorrow for sins, asking for forgiveness and attempting to live a godly life are foundational requirements
- James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. **The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.** 17 Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.
- *Note about lots of people praying—good to involve in praising God for answers, but not necessary for his answers*
- 1 John 3:21 **Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. 23** And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

In spite of all of the warnings and cautions, we are to pray

- 1 Thes 5:14 And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.¹⁵ See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.¹⁶ Rejoice **always,**¹⁷ **pray without ceasing,**¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Even when you don't know what to pray, pray

- Romans 8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.
- In any relationship so important to "talk it out"
- Don't know where, what, just talk....
- So too with our God
- As we'll see next week in the story of Habakkuk.