

The Joy of Praying
(1 Kings 17:1, 18:1-2,41-46; Mark 1:32-35,
Matthew 14:20-24; Romans 8:26-27)

The psalmist writes, “Thou hast put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.” One of the ways that God puts joy into our lives is through prayer, and yet for many people prayer is a burden. Prayer is a duty. Prayer is an obligation, like calisthenics, like pushups, like boot camp in the army, but it is not a joy.

Where would I get the idea that many find prayer far more of a burden than a joy? I get it from reading a minister who thought that there was something wrong with him because his experience with prayer was like talking to a wall. No answer. I get it from reading Bruce Larson tell about his early struggles with getting up early in the morning to keep a quiet time. He would fall asleep. His mind would wander. Others in the household thought he was trying to play a game of spiritual one-upsmanship. On those days that he failed to keep his quiet time he felt defeated. I get this idea from many who are faithful in prayer. They feel that they have fulfilled their Christian duty, but it has not been joy for them.

There are good reasons why people feel this way, why prayer seems like a chore burden and not like joy. Look for a moment at the scripture we read from the Old Testament. God has brought a great drought and famine over the land of Samaria. It is three years and not a drop of rain has fallen. God tells Elijah that he will soon send rain. So Elijah goes up to the top of the mountain, gets on his knees and puts his face between his hands. Then he sends his servant to look for rain. No rain. Elijah gets down on his knees and prays. Sends his servant. No rain. This happens seven times. Finally the servant sees a little cloud, no bigger than a hand just above the horizon. The cloud turns into a storm and rain finally comes. How many times has this story been preached as a lesson in the power of persevering prayer. Pray. If the result does not appear on the horizon, pray again. If the sky is still barren, pray again. Do it on the hard rock of a barren mountain peak with your face between your hands and don't give up. If you can just keep that difficult prayer marathon going long enough God will crack and the heavens will open, rain will come down and the earth will rejoice.

Read this passage again, more carefully this time. Notice that it is God who declares the three year drought, and it is God who declares rain will soon come. It is not Elijah, who makes the decisions. Elijah does not say, time for the drought to end, I'm going to get down on my knees and let God know. "Oh, God!" "Yes, Elijah, what is it." "It's time for the drought to end, send down some rain." "Okay, Elijah, I'm glad that you let me know, but, do I really have to do it right now? I'm kind of in the middle of something else." "Well, God, I'll just keep bugging you until you act." Hey, a lot of preacher preach this passage in just this way! Read the story again. It sounds more like this. "Elijah!" "Yes, Lord, what is it?" "You know that drought." "Yes, Lord, we've been baking down here for three years. Nary a drop of rain." "Well, guess what!" "I can't guess. What, Lord, tell me." "It's going to end soon. Get ready!" I'm guessing that Elijah could have gone to sleep and the rain would still have come.

Don't we tend to think that prayer is something that humans do to get God to flex his arm and make things happen? The basketball team huddles in the locker room. Ahead of them a momentous game for the championship. The coach bows her head. "Lord, the battle is not to the strong or the mighty, the victory is through the strength of the Lord. By your strength, let us win that game." I get a kick out of the psalmist. He thinks he can bargain with God. He is on his sick bed and believes that he may well die. And so lifts up his voice and begs God to let him live. But why should God let him live? He's got it all figured out. Corpses don't praise God. If God lets him die, there will be one less voice in the choir. "God, you can't let me die. Who would be left to praise you?!" If we never pray. If we clench our teeth and press our lips tightly together, will God's plans fail, and justice crumble? If the sound of prayer never passes from our lips, will God be poorer? No, but I believe that we will be immeasurably poorer for it. Our lives will be filled with less joy and less strength.

You see, there is another face to prayer. A face so beautiful that people write songs that extol the "Sweet Hour of Prayer."

At first glance, when we watch Jesus go off to prayer, we think that it he is going off to do his spiritual calisthenics. It has been a hard, hard day. He has been busy all day long. He has healed Peter's mother-in-law. As soon as he did, word spread throughout town, and by the time he is finished eating every leper, every blind person, every lame person, everyone who has mental illness is at the door clamoring for attention. And he heals many of them, casting out

demons, removing the red ugly blotches from the skin of lepers and making people walk again. He'd like to go to bed, but, no sir! He hasn't done his devotions yet. So it's off to his place of prayer. A long walk for a tired body, then put those knees on the ground. Let's get it over with. At first glance it seems like Jesus is headed off to do more spiritual work, to once more drain himself through spiritual exertion, so that, at the end of the day he can finally fall exhausted into his bed for the sleep he most dearly desires. At first glance.

Look again. Jesus is pressed on every side. He has already healed 50 people, but the waiting room is filled with 50 more. He could be here all night. Maybe he ought to stay. Who will heal this people, if he doesn't? Compassion fatigue is a word that comes to mind. They are there, they need his help. They press around. No! It is time for a break. And so he goes to a quiet place, where he can be alone, to rest, think, pray. Maybe we think of Jesus as so powerful that he never suffers compassion fatigue. When a woman with a continual bleeding hemorrhage came up and touched him, he immediately felt power go out of him. This evening he has healed many. How much power has gone out, how much energy has been drained? How tired is he? How weary? It's time for a break. He goes out to a quiet place. No one else around. Just Jesus, and his thoughts and his needs and God. One of my friends says that when she wants to experience God she goes out into the forest and looks at the sky. By going out Jesus guards his life from over activity. By going out Jesus renews his spiritual energy. It is time for the healer to be healed, for the one who has given all day long, finally to receive, to be strengthened, to be ministered to. He goes to get away from people who want to enthusiastically acclaim him, perhaps to use him, to take what he gives, but who do not desire to be his disciples. Prayer feels to us like work, but to Jesus it was rest. To us it feels draining, to Jesus it was fresh strength. When we think prayer we think head down, hands pressed firmly together, knees against the ground, back straight. Paul, in his letter to Timothy suggests that there are other postures for prayer. He urges people to pray lifting holy hands. After a long day, Jesus finally came to a place of rest and strength in the presence of his Father.

Do we think that prayer is something that we do, on our own? We haven't paid attention to the Apostle Paul. What a different image he give us! What a different understanding! Here prayer is not a marathon effort to move a sluggish God to bring rain to a thirsty land.

Here it is God who helps us. 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.” It has been said that grief is a story waiting to be told. When someone loses a loved one, as they go through the time of hurt and anger and dismay, they don’t want or need people to tell them that it is, after all God’s will. They don’t need or want people to help them understand the reasons behind it or urge them not to be mad at God. But if someone comes and says, “Tell me about it”, then the words begin to flow. They are glad for a chance to express the sorrow, the pain, the hurt. Grief is a story waiting to be told. But beyond that, those who have lost loved ones want to have a time by themselves, in their rooms, when no one is there to make them feel ashamed or inhibited, when they can sit on their beds or stand by the dresser and just cry, until the tears roll down their cheeks. Because there are some things that are too deep for words to express. It is the same with our deepest prayers. God’s Spirit speaks through us to express to God things that are too deep for words.

In a powerful and wonderful hymn, which is a favorite of mine, Frederick Faber writes, “The love of God is broader than the measures of man’s mind.” I believe that prayer, too, is broader than our minds can grasp; broader than our experience. Yes, prayer is asking God for what we need, but it is far more than that. Prayer is adoration. Prayer is thanksgiving. Try sitting down sometime, in a comfortable chair with a notepad on your lap. Close your eyes and think back over your life and begin to list those times when you have experienced great happiness or joy. When you cried tears of happiness, or laughed for joy. Think of the beauty that you have seen, or the food you have eaten. Would there be room enough on the paper to list everything? Then remember that every ounce of joy was given to you by God who loves you. Lift these up as an offering of thanksgiving. “Thank you, Lord!” Who knows in what way God might hear, or how loudly the praise would fall on God’s ears. The prayer itself would bring joy to your day.

When C.S. Lewis was grieving the loss of his wife, a friend asked him why he kept on praying to God. He said, “I don’t pray because I think that by praying I can change God. I pray because through praying God can change me.” Everything about us is uncovered before God’s eyes. Nothing that we have done or ever will do is hidden from him. He knows a word before it is on our lips. He

watched us being formed in our mothers' wombs. When we pray, we are not telling God anything that God does not already know. The question is < "Do we know?" Do we know what is hidden in our hearts and lives? Who we are, our brokenness, our pride, our hurt, our sin, our hopes and fears--they are not hidden from God, but are they hidden from us? Are we pushing aside, even without knowing it, the things that we need to know if we are to be more at peace, more loving, more forgiven?

If we are to pray, a few things are necessary. We need to show up. We need to make space and time in our lives when for a moment we turn off the noise of our everyday activities and pressures. We have to tell the truth. Not because God doesn't already know, but because we need to be honest with ourselves. If we told the truth, completely, to our employers, they might fire us, or to our wives, they might divorce us, or to the IRS, they might throw us in jail. But when we talk to God no other human ear hears and no other eyes see. Only God, and God already knows, but when we pray, we begin to know. The scales fall from our eyes. By praying, we open our hearts and our lives to the presence of God's Spirit, and we are changed. Like wheat slowly growing in the ground, God works in us. God is love. We are praying to someone who loves us more than we love ourselves, who knows us better than we know ourselves. When we pray, we come "to know ourselves as we really are and feel the acceptance of the One who loves us no matter what." (Journaling, Ann Broyles, p. 11.) We can pray by keeping a spiritual journal. We can write down what has happened, and our reflections about why. We can ask ourselves why we acted or felt as we did. Why were we so angry? Why did we cave in? Why did we invest so much energy in an old hurt? God opens our eyes and hearts and gives us strength for today and tomorrow. The love of God is broader than the measure of our minds. Prayer is broader than anything we know so far.

Prayer is not burden. It is a quiet place. Prayer is not guilt, but forgiveness, not sorrow, but joy. Prayer is guidance. Prayer is strength in trouble. Prayer is thanksgiving and adoration. When his the busy press of his days threatened to consume him, Jesus went away to a quiet place and there he found the joy and strength of his Father. When we know prayer as burden, but as blessing, then we discover that God has for us an immeasurable surprise, a gift beyond our imagination. When we take time to discover the many faces of

prayer; when, beyond discovering, we practice communicating with God's and listening for God's answer; when we open our eyes watch God moving in mysterious ways, then I believe that God's is filled with delight. Far more than that, God pours delight into our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.