

The Necessity of Prayer

2 Chronicles 20:1-23

Pastor Tom

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In the second half of his adult life, he discovered prayer. He realized he barely scratched the surface of what the Bible commanded and promised regarding prayer. Then came the dark weeks following the Sept 11 attacks in New York City. Though people rallied, it was like the whole city sank into a corporate clinical depression. For his family, the shadow intensified as his wife Kathy struggled with the effects of Crohn's disease. Finally, he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

At some point during all this, his wife urged him to do something with her they had never been able to muster the self-discipline to do regularly. She asked him to pray with her every night. *Every night!* She used an illustration that crystallized her feelings very well. As he remembers, it went something like this.

*Imagine you were diagnosed with such a lethal condition that the doctor told you that you would die within hours unless you took a particular medicine – a pill every night before going to sleep. Imagine that you were told that you could never miss it or you would die. Would you forget? Would you not get around to it some nights? No – it would be so crucial that you wouldn't forget, you would never miss. Well, if we don't pray together to God, we're not going to make it because of all we are facing. I'm certainly not. We HAVE to pray. We can't just let it slip our minds."*¹

I heard Tim Keller tell this story while listening to a podcast walking my dog in the winter of 2015. His story resonated with me in that I was dissatisfied with my prayer life. I felt I too was just scratching the surface. I prayed and participated in several prayer gatherings a week, but I sensed something needed to change. I purchased Keller's book about prayer and began to read. But I didn't only want to read this book to check it off of a list and put it my shelf under the "already read" section. I wanted to think about and reflect on it and incorporate some of the many challenges and practices laid out through this book.

I started some changes in the summer of 2015. Then came the fall and I struggled to persevere in some of the changes made. So I reread the book. I asked for God's help. I have taken notes on every chapter. It has not been easy. Yet the times of refreshment from the Lord and the deepening satisfaction found in Him are becoming more and more frequent. I certainly have not arrived. But by God's grace, I am going deeper in prayer than I was in the winter of 2015. It is my conviction that I'm not the only one in this body that has barely scratched the surface of all the Bible commands & promises about prayer. We as the people of SVBC need to go deeper; much deeper in prayer with the Lord than where we're at right now.

¹ Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God, (Dutton, New York, 2014), 1-2.

How's your prayer life my friends? Is prayer so essential to you that it's like the oxygen of your spiritual life? Or is prayer more like something you might get around to if you have time? If you don't think you need to pray, it can reveal a lot about your heart. It could reveal that you're finding your deepest satisfaction in something other than God so you're committing idolatry. You're treating something or someone as more important than God. And to give anything or anyone higher importance in your life than the Lord imitates the Israelites who worshipped idols made of stone and wood instead of the living God. Or you might be living a complacent Christian life in disobedience to God. You're not taking any risks or doing any of the hard calling that the Christian life demands and can only be fulfilled through the power of the Spirit and connection with God through prayer. Or maybe you don't know how to pray. Or maybe you've never been taught or you've just scratched the surface.

So we are going to think about, study, learn and practice prayer to God this fall. We're doing this because it's absolutely essential to our Christian lives and the life of this body. Without prayer, we can't grow as disciples of Jesus Christ which is the reason why we exist as a church. We cannot grow in our spiritual lives when we are disconnected from God. We cannot generate spiritual life in the church. We must view prayer as a primary means of connecting directly with God. We must see it like an astronaut sees their oxygen mask while they walk in space or a diver sees their breathing tank when they're 50 feet below the surface. Without it we will shrivel up spiritually.

Today, I want to show you an incident in Scripture that reveals the absolute necessity of prayer in the life of God's people. Once we go through that, we're going to pray together.

2 Chronicles 20:1-23 (ESV)

20 After this the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. ²Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, "A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; and, behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar" (that is, Engedi). ³Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. ⁴And Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.

⁵And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, ⁶and said, "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. ⁷Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? ⁸And they have lived in it and have built for you in it a sanctuary for your name, saying, ⁹'If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house and before you—for your name is in this house—and cry out to you in our affliction, and you will hear and save.'¹⁰ And now behold, the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they

came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy—¹¹ behold, they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession, which you have given us to inherit. ¹² O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

¹³ Meanwhile all Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children. ¹⁴ And the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel the son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the midst of the assembly. ¹⁵ And he said, “Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you, ‘Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God’s.’ ¹⁶ Tomorrow go down against them. Behold, they will come up by the ascent of Ziz. You will find them at the end of the valley, east of the wilderness of Jeruel. ¹⁷ You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.’ Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed. Tomorrow go out against them, and the LORD will be with you.”

¹⁸ Then Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the LORD, worshiping the LORD. ¹⁹ And the Levites, of the Kohathites and the Korahites, stood up to praise the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

²⁰ And they rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Tekoa. And when they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, “Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the LORD your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed.” ²¹ And when he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the LORD and praise him in holy attire, as they went before the army, and say,

“Give thanks to the LORD,
for his steadfast love endures forever.”

²² And when they began to sing and praise, the LORD set an ambush against the men of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed. ²³ For the men of Ammon and Moab rose against the inhabitants of Mount Seir, devoting them to destruction, and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, they all helped to destroy one another.

Jehoshaphat was a good king. A descendent of David, he led the nation in returning to God. He sent out teachers into the villages to spread God’s word. The Lord was with him and turned the hearts of the people towards life. The Lord honored Jehoshaphat by bringing fear upon the nations surrounding Judah. In those days when the threat of attack was a daily fact of life, other nations fearing you brought security.

But one day a messenger came with news that threatened everything he had ever worked for. This news endangered his life, the lives of his family and the survival of the nation. The Moabites, Ammonites and Meunites were three people groups that lived on the east side of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. They had combined to form an army. They travelled

around the southern end of the Sea to a place that King David once used to escape his tormentors – En Gedi. It was not that far from Jerusalem.

The fact that this army got to En Gedi before Jehoshaphat heard anything about it reveals the weakness of his position. How could they have slipped through his outposts? How had they missed defending that area of the country? The text tells us Jehoshaphat was afraid.

Some of you can totally relate to Jehoshaphat this morning. You're lives are threatened or endangered or troubled by something or someone – illness; unemployment; uncertainty; overwhelming challenges; difficult family situations; pain. You too might be afraid.

But Jehoshaphat immediately turns to the Lord. He seeks the Lord. He proclaims a fast throughout the nation. He calls the people to stop going on as if everything is okay. Stop what you're doing and gather before the Lord because our very existence is threatened. And you might be thinking "that's over dramatic for us. There's no invading army at the borders or Canada. Our society is not on the verge of collapse. Sure, we're going through some challenging economic times but we're okay.

You're right in one sense. We don't have a physical army assembling to invade our country. But there's a spiritual army of evil, demons and rulers who constantly look for weak points to invade lives, families, schools, businesses and churches. They love it when we go about life as if there is no threat from them. They love it when we think we're doing just fine in our complacent Christianity. This crazy talk of praying every night or every day is fanatical stuff. They want us to forget or not get around to prayer.

But Jehoshaphat did pray. His prayer is preserved for us in verses 6-12. He recalls how God had given this land to Israel. He recalls God's faithfulness to his forefathers. He describes the threat like we talked about describing our circumstances last week. Then he appeals to the Lord to act in verse 12. "O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

Can you imagine if one of the candidates for President of the United States admitted that they were powerless against the great horde of problems facing that nation and admitted they didn't know what to do? That doesn't fit the profile of the confident, competent executive who's in control and can lead his or her people to the Promised Land. Yet I wonder if those

candidates admitted that and said their first step in office would be to call the nation to seek the Lord, how many might actually respect such honesty.

The Lord graciously responds to Jehoshaphat's prayer immediately in a tangible way. The spirit comes upon a prophet who proclaims the Lord's word. "Verse 15 – Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God's. . . Stand firm, hold your position and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf."

This proclamation to stand firm follows a familiar pattern of encouragement throughout Scripture. There were times God did call His people to fight the battle. But there were other times where the call was to stand firm and depend on the Lord to see what He will do. He had already done this for Israel at the Red Sea. They were trapped with the sea at their back and the Egyptian army in front of them. Then the Lord opened the sea and brought them through it and then destroyed the Egyptian army.

And Jesus stops his disciples from taking up the sword to defend him. Instead they must pray and depend on the Lord's intervention for help. Time and time again, God sent his angels to deliver until God allows them to die when their work is done. But the whole time, the Lord was in control. And in one of the most descriptive passages of spiritual warfare in the New Testament, Ephesians 6, what does the Lord command His people to do? Stand firm with the armor of God." We can withstand the enemy's assaults. Through prayer we call on the Lord to fight and his angels to act and protect.

So Jehoshaphat hears these words from the prophet. He and the people rejoice at the coming deliverance of the Lord. The next day, he gathers his army to go and meet the enemy. But he doesn't use scouts or elite military units to lead the way. He sends out the worship leaders first. They sing while they march. "Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever." While they sing, the Lord sets an ambush. The Moabites and Ammonites and Meunites destroy one another so that when Judah arrives, all they discover is a battlefield covered with the devastated armies.

Now one question I would like you to ponder for a moment – What would have happened if Jehoshaphat didn't pray? He probably would have gathered his armies in a panic. He probably would have rode out to meet them the best he could. He might have put up a good fight yet at a great loss of soldiers and power. Maybe the surrounding enemies would have grown in courage to attack him. Maybe his political and religious enemies would have pounced on this weakness. What if Jehoshaphat didn't pray?

God has chosen at times to act in response to His people's prayers. It's not the prayers that have the power. It's God to whom we connect through faith and prayer. Yet if we don't pray, He may choose not to act at all and let us try to muddle our way through on our own until there's no alternative left but to turn to Him.

Sadly, for many of us, it takes a desperate situation to cause us to pray. When our security is threatened, when our lives are falling apart, when we're barely getting by, we seem to find time to pray. But if things return to normal, we can slide back into complacency.

If that's you, my friend, I plead with you to turn to the Lord before you're forced to by some disaster. I've seen so many people turn to Christ as their very last resort after they've tried everything else. Then they turn to Him with their shattered lives. He can pick up the broken pieces and renew our lives. But some of that brokenness and disaster could be avoided if only we came to Christ now in prayer.

We have received this gift of prayer at great cost to our Lord. Without Jesus sacrifice we could not enter into intimate fellowship with God. God's holiness and justice require that rebellion against his perfect law be dealt with in the suffering of both spiritual and physical death. We humans can do nothing about reconciling this rebellion we've committed against God. But Jesus Christ, the God-man, took our place under judgment and received in himself the penalty that was our sentence. He laid the foundation for our pardon and immunity from God's prosecution. So we must look in faith outside of ourselves to Christ and his cross as the sole ground of forgiveness and hope.² People who have turned to Christ in faith like this are called Christians. In coming to Christ and receiving forgiveness, we are given the privilege to spiritually enter the very throne room of God in prayer. That access was purchased with the blood of Christ.

So wherever your prayer life has been at, I invite you to take hold of the opportunity this fall to go much deeper with the Lord in prayer.

So that is what we are going to do now. I want to invite you to get together as spouses or families or with the people around you and pray out loud. Or if you're not willing to try that, pray silently by yourself. I invite you to pray in a few ways. Maybe you need to confess your prayerlessness and simply call on God to help you pray. Maybe you want to pray more but don't know how. Then ask the Lord to teach you to pray. Then will you pray for this church family – pray that we will collectively grow in our prayer life. Ask the Lord to stir in our hearts that realization of our desperate need for Him. Ask Him to change our view of prayer from optional to essential.

² Sam Storms; Packer on the Christian Life, Wheaton, Ill., Crossway, 39.

Ask God to lead and help you speak and pray. When it seems like we're done – I will close this time in prayer.