

THE INVITATION OF PRAYER

The story is told about a poor widow with several children. Every day she would go out on her front porch and raised her hands in prayer saying, “Lord, you know I have no food to feed my children today. Please provide for our daily needs.” Her next-door neighbor was an atheist who was sick and tired of hearing her pray every day so he decided to teach her a lesson. He went out and bought several bags of groceries and then sat them down on the woman’s front porch, rang the doorbell, and then hid in the bushes. The widow came out, saw the groceries, and burst into joyful praise. “Thank you, God, you have supplied my need! Thank you for answering my prayer! Bless the Lord, O my soul!” The atheist jumped out from behind a bush and arrogantly said, “No lady, God has not supplied your needs today, I have! See how foolish it was to trust in a nonexistent God.” Without hesitation the woman burst into another prayer, “Dear God, you are so wonderful! You not only provided food for me today, but you even got the devil to pay for it!”

Today we are continuing in our series on prayer. Last time we talked about the power of prayer. This is the thanksgiving weekend, so today I want to talk about the invitation of prayer. God invites us to come. He wants us to come to Him with our problems and our requests.

Jer 33:2-3 This is what the LORD says, he who made the earth, the LORD who formed it and established it -- the LORD is his name: 3 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.'

It has been said that God’s phone number is Jeremiah 33:3. From this verse we see three important truths about prayer.

1. The Prompting - invitation

God invites us to come. He says to each one of us, “Call to me.” How complicated is that? In any and every situation, from any place or language, just call out to God. You do not have to be eloquent or profound. There is no requirement of wording or posture. You simply call on Him.

Call on Him when you are happy and rejoice in His blessings. Call on Him when your sad and find His comfort and hope in His promises. Call on Him when you are convicted and find grace and cleansing through the sacrifice of Jesus. Call on Him when you are depressed and hear His words of encouragement and support. Call on Him when your world has been turned upside down and watch Him reveal to you a new world that is true and pure. Call on Him when your burden is too heavy and the Holy Spirit will come and carry you through it. Call on Him when your strength is gone and your faith is weak, and find yourself mounted on eagles' wings, able to run and not be weary and walk and not faint.

It is important to understand the context in which these words from God were given to Jeremiah. God called Jeremiah to be a prophet during the time of King Josiah. He was a good king and during his reign he led the nation back to a right relationship with God. However, in 609 BC King Josiah died and Israel’s future was very uncertain. King Nebuchadnezzar came to power in Babylon and his armies attacked Jerusalem and placed it under siege. Eventually the city was captured and its people were taken into captivity. Jeremiah had already declared from God that the nation was about to be taken into exile, and that the exile would be for 70 years.

This announcement was not received very well and King Zedekiah had imprisoned Jeremiah in the court of the guard. People were plotting to kill him in order to silence his message.

So, think about that for a moment. Jeremiah was a prisoner, surrounded by people who wanted to kill him. In a doomed city surrounded by a huge powerful army. It is in that context that God speaks to Jeremiah and says, “Call to me.” God invites us to call on him. No matter what is happening in our lives, we are invited to come. Why is it that so often prayer is a last resort for us? Why are we sometimes like Jonah and have to be in the belly of a whale at the bottom of the ocean before we pray?

Jeremiah was told to cry out. God stood ready to answer. What is important is that we recognize that in order to receive, we must first ask. God want us to ask. He not only wants this; He has placed Himself in dependency upon our asking.

Eze 22:30 I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.

As one pastor wrote, “In creating man with a free will and making man a partner in subduing the earth, God voluntarily limited Himself. He made His work on earth dependent upon man, what he would do or not do. God commissioned man with the responsibility to subdue and rule over the earth. In God giving man responsibility for life on the earth He also limited His own involvement. God involves Himself as man (His care taker) makes request of Him. Man, by his prayers, holds the lifeline to the blessings and specific involvement of God in human affairs.”

This is why Jesus taught us to pray “your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We pray that God’s will be done in the affairs of earth as it is in the affairs of Heaven. The sovereign God has given man the responsibility to realize his need for God’s activity in human affairs and the obligation ask for it.

So why don’t we pray more often? We have been invited to come and call out to God, but so often we only do so as a last resort. So often we have not because we ask not. God stands ready with all the resources of heaven at His disposal, and we are silent.

Prayer is powerful. I heard the story of a woman who was married to a farmer. She was known to everyone in the community as being a godly woman, but her husband was not a Christian. One day the husband got drunk and struck her. Later that night, he overheard his wife on her knees praying before bed, “God, I have had it! I cannot take any more of this. So, you are going to have to either save him or kill him.” On hearing this he ran out to the barn and fell on his knees crying out to God for salvation. His life was transformed after that. One day on the way to church the wife asked him, “What made you finally decide to follow Jesus?” He told her, “I heard your prayer, and experience has taught me that God always answers your prayers!”

That is our prompting. God has invited us to come. He says to each one of us today “call to me!”

2. The Promise - expectation

God told Jeremiah “Call to me *and I will answer you.*” That is a promise. In other words, you do your part, and I will do my part. Our job is to pray, God’s job is to answer.

God's invitation to call is followed by the assurance that He will answer. God stands ready and able to answer our prayers. When we do so, we should have the full assurance, expectation and confidence that He will in turn respond.

1Jn 5:14-15 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us -- whatever we ask -- we know that we have what we asked of him.

The promise is that God hears us and wants what is best for us. This does not mean that God will always just give us whatever we ask for. No wise parent would do that. God gives us what we need, not what we simply want. We need to pray according to His will and not our own. We know that, at all times, God hears us.

Psa 55:17 Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.

In order to truly understand the promise of Jeremiah 33:3 you have to understand the verse before it that declares who it is that is making that promise;

Jer 33:2 This is what the LORD says, he who made the earth, the LORD who formed it and established it -- the LORD is his name:

The God who invites us to call on him and promises to answer us is the Almighty infinite creator of the universe. There is nothing that is too hard for Him, nothing too difficult for Him to accomplish. Jeremiah understood this. In speaking to God in the chapter before this he said;

Jer 32:17 Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.

Remember the old song based on this verse?

Ah Lord God, Thou has made the heavens and the earth by Thy great power.
Ah Lord God, Thou has made the heavens and the earth by Thine out-stretched arm.
Nothing is too difficult for Thee, nothing is too difficult for Thee
Great and mighty God, great in counsel and mighty in deed
Nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing. Nothing is too difficult for Thee

Do you believe that? I mean, do you REALLY believe that? You have probably sung that song many times in the past. Did you really believe the words that you were singing? God can do anything. There is nothing that is too difficult for Him. If we really believe that, then why is it so often that we do not live like it?

I think we often do not live like it because we are more interested in God doing what we want Him to do than in God doing what He wants to do. So often we misinterpret prayer to be "My kingdom come, my will be done." The truth is that often God does not answer our prayers in the way that we expect Him to. This should not surprise us. We are limited finite created beings. We do not have all the facts. God may not always answer us in the way that we expect or the way that we would have chosen, but the promise is that He always hears us and will always answer us in the way that is best.

I read about a Gospel singing group that went to Northern Ireland to do a series of concerts. This was during the time that the Catholics and Protestants were fighting. The group was scheduled one afternoon to do a concert outside a department store in downtown Londonderry. The weather looked menacing, so they all prayed that there would be no rain. They were expectant that God would do a miracle. An hour before the concert it started to pour outside. The team was devastated. They had prayed in faith, so why didn't God keep the rain away? At the last moment their tour guide found another indoor venue around the corner, where they could set up and sing. The concert started as the rain continued to pour outside. Then, in the middle of the concert, BOOM! A car bomb had gone off outside the department store where the team would have been if God had answered their prayers.

God prompts us and invites us to call on Him and promises us that He will answer us when we do.

3. The Provision - revelation

God says to Jeremiah, "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know." We are invited to call out to God. He promises to answer us. The result is revelation. God reveals Himself to us.

The word used here for unsearchable is the Hebrew word BATSAR. It means to cut off. It is the same word used in Deut 1:28 to describe a fortified city, with walls up to heaven. The picture is of something that is inaccessible or impenetrable. The greatest things of God are not learned or attained or conquered by human strength or wisdom. They are received by seeking the Lord through prayer.

1Co 2:14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

So often in life we can find ourselves in situations that seem so far beyond our control. So often I sit with people in counselling and I hear them talk about the problems that they have gotten themselves into. It is like a huge knot, and the more you try to untangle it the tighter and more difficult it becomes. At times like that we need to call on God and trust him to work out the mess. What may seem impossible or inaccessible to us is nothing to God.

In the chapter before, God demonstrates this to Jeremiah by asking him to step out in faith and trust Him. He asks Jeremiah to practically demonstrate his faith to everyone around him. He asks him to buy a field. Again, let's remember the context. Where was Jeremiah during this? He was a prisoner, surrounded by people who wanted to kill him. In a city that is about to be destroyed by a powerful army that was surrounding it and its people taken into exile. Basically, it was like renting a deck chair on the Titanic *after* it had hit the iceberg. Not a good idea!

Jer 32:9-10 so I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out for him seventeen shekels of silver. 10 I signed and sealed the deed, had it witnessed, and weighed out the silver on the scales.

Why invest in something that is about to be destroyed? Basically, God is saying to Jeremiah "I got this." You may not understand this right now. The situation around you may look hopeless.

Things may seem impossible to us, but God is the God of the impossible. What seems inaccessible to you is nothing to God, so call on him to help you.

We have high shelves in our kitchen, so from time-to-time Naomi asks me to reach for something on the upper shelf. What is difficult for her is easy for me, and I love to help when I can.

Is there anything in your life right now that just seems unsearchable? It is beyond your reach. Is there an issue that you just do not have the strength to deal with, a problem that is just too hard for you to try and figure it out? Call to God. He will answer you and He will help you. He is able to loosen the tightest knot. He has the resources to meet any need. He has the wisdom to solve any problem. He has the power to cover any weakness. Go to Him in prayer.

We believe that God answers prayers, and we believe that God often uses people to be conduit of His blessings. There is nothing on earth like being the answer to someone's prayers.

I heard the story of a team of young people from Canada who went on a missions trip to Kentucky. The team was working with a local church going around the community and helping people with odd jobs. One day the team was working at the home of a woman who had asked for help. They were helping fix her plumbing, doing some electrical work and cleaning up her yard. The group was made up of kids from well off homes. When the kids saw the overgrown grass, porches and front yards littered with old cars, sofas and garbage, they began making fun of the people. "Who lives like this!" one girl said. The team began to act like a group who would rather be doing something else. They picked on each other and argued, making sarcastic jabs every chance they got.

Eventually the woman who owned the house could not take it anymore. With tears streaming down her face, she called the team together and sat them down on the grass in front the house. She shook her finger at them and speaking through the few teeth she had left said, "What is wrong with you kids? Do you not know? Do you really have no idea how long I have been praying for someone to show up and help me? Do you not understand how badly my kids need to have bedrooms with lights that work, and a bathroom that works? I have been praying for you for a long time. Don't you know you are here today as the answer to my prayers? Why don't you start acting like it."

From that moment on, everything changed. The youth no longer saw their work as an obligation, they realized that they were there for a reason. Instead of tearing each other down, they began to build each other up. They realized that they were an answer to someone's prayers, and they started acting like it.

God wants to use you to be a blessing to others. He invites us to come, promises that He will hear and answer and that the result will be provision and blessing. He is inviting us to come. The thing with invitations is that they are only as good as our response to them. In order to receive the blessing, you need to first respond to the invitation to that blessing. God will do His part, but first we need to do ours.

I heard the story of a man who was having some very serious financial problems. He went to his pastor and told him of all his troubles and the pastor suggested that he go to God in prayer about it. So, the man went home and that night he prayed, "Dear Lord please let me win the lottery so that I can pay all my bills. Thank you. Amen." Well, the lottery came and went and the man did not win.

So, he figured that maybe he was harboring unbelief in his heart so that night he went to God again in prayer saying, "Dear Lord, please let me win the lottery. I believe that You can hear me and that You have the power to do this and that You *will* answer my prayer. Thank you. Amen." The lottery again came and went and he still did not win. So, he figured that maybe there was sin in his life that was causing God not to answer his prayers. That night he prayed, "Dear God forgive me of all of my sins, I want to live for you alone Lord. Please Lord let me..." He was interrupted when all of a sudden a booming voice came from heaven that said, "WOULD YOU PLEASE JUST GO AND BUY A TICKET!"

Now I do not suggest to anyone this is a way to deal with your finances, but the point of the story is that often God does not bless us because we do not do what is required to receive that blessing. God has invited us to come and call to Him. Will we do it? Will we take the practical steps necessary to receive God's promise and provision?

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. It is a time we stop and reflect on the goodness of God and His provision for us. It is an invitation to come and remember. Will you make the most of that invitation? God has also invited us to come in prayer. He has promised to answer and reveal His will to us. Will we also accept His invitation?