

“The Hinge”
2 Kings 20:1 – 7; James 5:17 – 18

Some quotes to kick things off this morning:

“Some men's prayers need to be cut short at both ends and set on fire in the middle.”

Dwight L. Moody

“Work as if everything depended upon your work, and pray as if everything depended upon your prayer.”

William Booth

“The only time my prayers are never answered is on the golf course.”

Billy Graham

“I’m not a praying man, but Superman if you’re out there please save me Superman!”

Homer Simpson

Two weeks ago we looked at the question of unanswered prayer and how, when we pray, all sorts of variables come in to play and affect our prayers.

Then last week we looked at the story Hezekiah and the threat of the Assyrian army known for its vile and revolting treatment of the fallen enemies.

So we looked at giving over to God our burdens, our concerns, our fears in prayer.

And I said that if there was one thing you remember it was what?

Prayer is not something you do, it’s Someone you talk to.

The purpose of prayer is to nurture and cultivate a faithful, loving, personal connection with your Creator.

Everything about prayer flows from this.

So today I wonder if you’ve been in your prayer life where you pray and pray – maybe for a personal issue, maybe for a loved one – and... nothing seems to change.

I’ve had few seasons like that.

I had a season in my life where I was working where my finances were dissipating before my eyes. I'm reasonably frugal by nature and over a course of about year both anything left over from my income and my savings were reduced to almost zero.

Of course you pray about this ... but it just seemed to constant.

Perhaps we feel more like tourist who observed a devout Jewish man praying at the Western (Wailing) Wall in Jerusalem. As often happens at the Wall, the Jewish man rocked back and forth with closed eyes, beat his breast, and sometimes raised his hands. When he finished, the tourist asked, "What do you pray for?"

The Jewish man responded, "I pray for righteousness. I pray for the health of my family. I pray for peace in the world, especially in Jerusalem."

Intrigued the tourist asked, "Are these prayers effective?"

"Well," the Jewish man responded, "it's like talking to a wall."

So, I don't know but in those seasons good faithful Christians ask, does prayer really make a difference?

Does anything hinge on what I pray?

For one, we do have a God that Scripture describes as being omniscient – that He is all knowing.

He knows the past perfectly, He all about the present, and we do have a God who knows the future.

Throughout the Bible there are a number of accounts where God pulled back the curtains on the future and allowed his servants to see what was about to transpire.

That still happens today:

For example, a friend was called to pastor a church in Australia and the night before he flew out he had a vivid dream. He was speaking to the church and small fires began to break out all around the walls of the building. These weren't fires of revival or renewal but fiery criticism.

As the fires ignited the he heard a voice urging him to keep speaking the truth. Next morning he shook off the dream and headed for the airport.

Sure enough for the next nine months he found himself battling all sorts of issues and criticisms. Yet he kept speaking the truth out of faithfulness to God and the dream he had been given. God had forewarned him.

Or Brother Yun, the “Heavenly Man”:

Who here is familiar with the story of Brother Yun, “the heavenly man”?

Yun was imprisoned in China for his faith before he escaped. He and his family were relocating to Germany via Myanmar and Thailand when two nights before leaving he had a dream. In his dream he saw that his son safely passed through customs and crossed over the border but when he attempted to do the same he was detained. Two days later that is exactly what happened. The authorities accused him of being a spy and imprisoned him in Yangon City.

There he was met with conditions they no person is meant to exist in. 10,000 men were allowed a two minute shower every four days. Yun wrote, “No words can adequately describe the conditions there. Many of the prisoners suffered from AIDS and a large number had leprosy. The smell of rotting flesh invaded every corner of the dark, forsaken facility, where precious souls are left to die in silence.”

For no reason at all Yun was sentenced to seven years in a hell hole. During his time he became infested with parasites and could see worms crawling under his skin. A plague swept through the prison and he became so sick he had to be taken to the prison hospital. Even so he saw a number of people come to Jesus for the first time.

Then one day Yun received a whisper in his spirit. He was told by God that in seven months he would be released. True to that promise, on September 18, 2001 Brother Yun was taken from prison and assisted onto a plane bound for Germany.

So people know this and then they read passages in the Bible and it seems to confirm their suspicions.

They point to Malachi 3:6: “I the Lord do not change...”

Or even more directly, 1 Samuel 15:2 – “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.”

If God has already decided what He is going and if this is the case, then it is reasonable to ask: why pray?

If the future is a done deal in God’s mind from all eternity past, then it could be argued there is little point in prayer.

Someone summed it up in this way:

“Our relationship with God is built on conforming our will to His sovereign decrees, not believing that human hands possess delegated supernatural faculties to alter His eternal, immutable mind.”

And so do you know that conclusion some people make?

It’s this: prayer doesn’t change God’s plans but it changes us.

Prayer is good for us.

It spending time with Maker and Saviour; the most beautiful and magnificent.

And it has a positive influence on the one praying.

Prayer is a means by which we are transformed – and again that is a good and great thing.

But in this view, prayer doesn’t really make a difference; it doesn’t change God’s plans but it changes us.

Nothing external really hinges on our prayer life.

Therefore prayer is a means by which we are conformed to the unchangeable will of God.

Biblically speaking, is that *all* we read and see in Scripture?

On the one hand we have these statements that God doesn’t change His mind but on the other we have the story of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah’s Illness

Our reading about Hezekiah's illness is actually found three times in the Bible.¹

Isaiah presents the message that Hezekiah is sick and going to die.

The language is explicit: "You will not recover".

We don't exactly know what it was but it's terminal like around 35,000 kiwis every year.

Hezekiah response is to pray to God.

Isaiah hadn't even had a chance to leave the palace when he was told to return and announce a new message from God.

He returns and announces that he is going to live.

God says, "I have **heard your prayer** and seen your tears; I will heal you.'

Not only that but "I will add another fifteen years to your life."

This is not the lone example in Scripture.

In Exodus chapter 32 the people rebel against God and begin to worship an idol.

In response to this the Lord is aroused to so much anger that He says to Moses that He's had enough of these people and He is going to wipe them out.

In their place God will make Moses into a great nation.

What happens then?

Moses prays and there is a rigorous back-and-forth.

Then we are told that "the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."²

In the story of Jonah, Jonah is commanded to go to the city of Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, with a message impending judgement. Assyria as we heard committed horrendous acts of cruelty to their defeated enemies, had taken the kingdom of Israel into captivity and had threatened Judah.

After much reluctance Jonah delivers the message and the all the people repent and seek God's forgiveness in prayer.

God in turn relents from pouring out his judgement on them.

However we look at it, in each these stories something changed.

Hezekiah did not passively accept his current circumstances or conclude that God was simply wanting to change his attitude.

¹ See also Isaiah 38 and 2 Chronicles 32:24 – 26.

² Exodus 32:1 – 14.

Prayer made a difference.

Moses appears to have had genuine say so about what would happen to the Israelites.

You could almost say Moses shaped the future through prayer.

Prayer is a means by which God can influence us, but in Moses we see a pray-er seeming to influence God.

We the people of Nineveh respond to Jonah's message with genuine contriteness of heart we're told, "When God what they did and how they turned from their evil way, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."³

So I have said a lot.

On one hand we have God who knows the what the future holds (and can warn us of what is to come), and on the other we have examples of the future being different in response to prayer.

"What would you do with these two ideas?"

To be honest there is no easy way reconciling these two ideas.

They both are found in Scripture. Both feature in major parts of Scripture

So where am I up to?

It seems that at times our prayers have genuine say so.

Prayer is the hinge on which the door to new and different future opens.

Christians are not fatalists.

So as Christians we don't do passive.

We believe the world can change and we believe our personal worlds can change.

We pray into situations believing they can be different.

We also accept that where circumstances do not appear to change God is able to do a work in us.

Whatever happens we can trust Him.

³ Jonah 3:10.

If you're like me you probably think, if only all my prayers could be as effective as Hezekiah's or Moses.

What I do look to is the encouragement of James:

“Elijah was a human just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”

The encouragement is the humanity of Elijah is emphasized as being no different from ours.

We don't have to be exceptional in our prayers.

We have an exceptional God.

What matters is the goodness and greatness of God.