

“Helped by the Helper” (Ephesians 6:18-20 & Romans 8:26-27)
Pastor John Bronson

March 27, 2011

Order of Worship for March 27th

Pre-service Song:

Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment: Vacation Bible School with Jennifer Gonzales & Men’s Ministry Survey

Call to Worship: Isaiah 43:1-3a and 10-14a and Prayer

Songs of Worship:

“Standing on the Promises”

Song # 410

“O Lord, You’re Beautiful”

Song # 643

“I Must Tell Jesus”

Song # 636

“Prince of Peace”

Overhead

“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”

Song # 210

Offering and Offertory

Special Music:

Message: “As We Were Taught” (Matthew 6:5-13)
by Pastor Bronson

Closing Song: “Change My Heart, O God” Song # 654

Parting Word of Grace

Evening Studies in the Word

Hebrews 7

5:30 – 7:00 pm

The Music Building

“The Prayer Closet”

March 27, 2011

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying for:

1. **As missionary families in Japan suffer alongside the Japanese people**, they will have many opportunities to demonstrate the love of God and share the gospel; that the Spirit will empower the gospel for the salvation of many souls; that help will reach the Japanese people from many places
2. **President Obama and Governor Brown:** that for both economic prudence will be matched with a deepening respect for the law, the constitution of both the nation and the state; that each will be moved by the Spirit to desire righteousness and truth
3. **Children’s Ministries:** that teachers and leaders will remain motivated by God’s love in serving; that many will volunteer to serve in this year’s Vacation Bible School; that new children from new families will be blessed through these ministries
4. **Military Personnel of the Week: Pvt. Casey Brubaker** (son of John, grandson of Larry and Wanda Brubaker):
5. **College Student of the Week: Heather Cardwell at University of California, Riverside** (daughter of Allison Cardwell):

The title of today’s message is “Helped by the Helper”. We have transitioned in our study of Ephesians, we have transitioned now from studying looking at the armor of God, and moving into what, when you look with care at what Paul says, you realize is the first application or use of the armor – primarily the sword – it is in prayer. We touched on that last week: it is in prayer that we have the first place where our hearts knit together with God in the Word and we become spiritual warriors. We enter into the fray, if you will, with our God.

All of us know that there are many kinds of prayer. Hopefully we engage in them. When Paul wrote a letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 2:1-2), he mentions a whole series of kinds of prayer that he enjoins, commands or instructs Timothy: there should be supplications and prayers and intercessions and thanksgivings. That is to be done for those who are in power over us. We should be praying that way for [President] Obama and that way for [Governor] Jerry Brown. It is not a matter of “do I like him?” it is not a matter of “do I agree with his policies?” It is a matter of, “Do I want God to bless him? Do I want God’s Spirit to rest upon him? Do I want him to be activated, motivated, moved, governed, restrained, directed by God?” I do! And so I will pray. We are enjoined and instructed to pray. If you look in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 you have that classic statement that we are to pray without ceasing. So the Christian person is one who is characterized by a ceaseless conversation with God. There is always an element, an aspect of our awareness of person which is in communion with God, constantly associating with Him and consequently constantly anticipating His involvement in whatever we are about or are doing. That is part of [the way] we become when we accept the gift of the Holy Spirit.

One of my favorite references to prayer is found in Nehemiah, chapter 2. We need the context of this particular statement in order to fully appreciate it. Nehemiah has told us already that he was the cup-bearer to the king, in this case the king of Babylon. As the cup-bearer – it is not always obvious to us what that meant – the cup-bearer held what was an exceedingly important and also a very dangerous position. His job was to make sure that the king was never poisoned. So guess who got to drink each thing first: it was Nehemiah. You can be certain that he would make certain as best he could that nothing was the matter with whatever was in that cup. But that was not the only danger that he faced. It was the law that whenever you walked into the presence of the king, who was of course the source of all blessedness and happiness, you were happy! If you weren’t happy, it maybe meant you weren’t happy with the king, in which case you might poison him. So you would die! The problem is that Nehemiah wasn’t happy and he needed to communicate his unhappiness to the king because he wanted permission from the king to go and take care of Jerusalem.

This is what we are told in Nehemiah 2:1f.

“In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, ‘Why is your face sad, seeing that you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.’ Then I was very much afraid. [I gave the introduction so that we would understand that he was justly afraid] I said to the king, ‘Let the king live forever! [No poison in my hands!] Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?’ The king said to me, ‘What are you requesting?’ So I prayed to the God of heaven.”

That prayer was on the order, “Yikes! Lord, I need help, and I need it now! For I have to talk to the king!”

There are many kinds of prayers. Prayers are adapted to the need of the moment: of course. (By the way, if you have MacArthur’s English Version Study Bible, if you turn to Luke 11, they have a little insert, a little essay that talks about the varieties of prayer which might benefit you to read.) If you are looking at Ephesians 6:18-20, there you will see that Paul is requesting of the Ephesians prayer and supplication. He has a couple of specific kinds of prayer that he is asking them to pray.

Prayers are adapted to the needs of the moment. So there are different kinds of prayer. In general categories we can anticipate that there is a huge difference in what we might call prayers on the run – how many of you had prayers on the run this week? I was speaking with Marge Hedrick and she talked about having a “prayer on the run”. She probably had so little time to pray that the Lord probably had to read her heart, because a car spun out right in front of her and she had the opportunity of watching it spin in front of her and come to a stop right next to her. I suspect that out of her believing heart and her trusting mind that she lifted up a prayer both during and after and probably thereafter on various occasions: “I can’t believe that happened! My goodness! God, thank-you!” As you know I have had more years in school than is reasonable and I remember there were many opportunities for me to open the exam and say, “O, Lord! Now is when I, I need what you have to give me. Nobody else is going to give to me. I should have read the book!” Prayers are adapted to the need. And I don’t want anything I have to say about prayer to cloud that realization in your mind.

There are also prayers by design. I have a caution. If we engage in prayer only on the run, and not by design, we are in great danger of being deceived. Why do I say that? There are a lot of reasons for saying that. Certainly in the context of our study of Ephesians we ought all to be very alert at this point to the reality of spiritual warfare, and that in fact there are spirits about who do not intend that we successfully commune with our God. They intend to throw us off. And we should certainly understand by now if we have grasped what Paul just in the course of Ephesians has told us about fallen human nature, that there is within us a propensity, that even in our saved condition there is still within the context of our flesh a leaning, towards that which pulls away from God. So we have this contention, this struggle. Prayers on the run generally are on the order of “Ah, I need...” Or “Eek, this is what they are demanding!” Or in one sense or another it is a crisis. Such situations as these do not [afford] opportunities for reflection, for careful calibration and for weighing out the validity of what our desire are within the context of the instruction of God’s word. We may have physical crises, or financial crises, or relational crises, or spiritual crises: whatever the troubles are that beset us. But we are warned, are we not? At that moment, particularly if we are spiritually minded, if we are those who have joined our lives to God in the understanding that there is a spiritual core to our being and there is a spiritual dimension to who we are, and we want then for our lives to be a reflection of and enriched by the spiritual realities, we are open to spiritual influence, well then we are going to be open to spiritual influences. But we are warned, are we not, in I John 4:1 in particular, we are warned that there are other spirits about. *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.”* Paul said Satan can appear as an angel of light. If you are in a dark place, and if you are gripped with uncertainties, and if you are unclear as to which way you are supposed to go, and there is suddenly a light source, you are very likely, in the intensity of that moment’s need, to turn and say, “Lead me, I’ll follow.” That is even more the case if that “light source” has pleasant, persuasive, desirable things to offer you if go in that direction.

We need times of deliberate prayer. These are times when we sit down with the word of God and open our minds and hearts to God, and ask Him to instruct us in the truth. One of the books I mentioned I would

make reference to which I saw it at the conference – I go to these conferences for two reasons: one is to hear the speakers, the other is to feed my addiction to books! – this book is called “The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment”. How do you know what you are looking at when you are looking at it? You will be receiving from this book in days and weeks to come: Discernment!

Go back with me to Nehemiah, chapter I. In chapter I we have a very different kind of prayer. You will notice that in chapter 2 there is no content to the prayer at all; it just says “Ah!” But here in chapter 1:5-11 we have recorded for us Nehemiah’s deliberate prayer. I say that because when you read the content of this prayer you recognize that there are few people on the face of the earth who could just sit down spontaneously on the moment with no forethought and this would come out of their mouths. This is thoughtful, very thoughtful. This is what he says.

“O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your dispersed be under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

That is not a prayer on the run. This is a carefully articulated prayer. Notice what Nehemiah does in this prayer. First, he clarifies to whom he prays. Who is this God to whom I am praying? He is the Creator. He is the covenant God. He is the maker. He is the God of love. He is the God who loves those who love Him and keep His commandments. This is the basis upon which Nehemiah brings his prayers to God. He knows that God is to be trusted. God keeps His word. Nehemiah reminds himself that this is so; He reminds himself that God said if you sin and rebel, I will punish. And he reminds himself that God said, if you repent and cry out to Me, I will bless and re-gather. Notice that Nehemiah recognizes the basis upon which he prays is that God has established a special relationship between him and God, and he remembers that relationship. Nehemiah can say of himself, ‘I am a keeper of the covenant. I do not stand merely in a relationship of need to this God, I stand in a covenantal relationship. We have a relationship that goes back over time. I know the terms of this relationship. I understand the expectations of God that he has laid upon me and I recognize God’s authority. Furthermore, in this prayer I identify myself with the people whom God has chosen. God has acted in space and time. He has acted to call people out for himself. I recognize that I am one of those people. I identify fully with those people. I and my father’s house have sinned; we are apart of His people. We recognize that we share a common experience of God’s judgment and grace, both, so I pray as one of those whom God knows, and I know God.’ Notice that what in fact is happening here is that Nehemiah is actually praying back to God His own promises: *“Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter...but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them...’”*

We can see that Nehemiah is not talking off the top of his head. He is talking out of the rich knowledge he has both by experience and by study of what God has done and what He will do, and upon what basis he will do it. Nehemiah is lifting back up to God His own words. And because he does this, he can pray with

full conviction. He is fulfilling the conditions that were put down, articulated by Jesus and repeated by John in I John 5:14-15, *“This is the confidence we have toward God, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.”* This is effective prayer. We know; we know; we know. Why do we know? We know because we know the God to whom we pray, and we know the relationship He has established with us, we know the promises that he has made and we know the covenant that wraps us up as a part of those whom He has chosen to be His witness upon the face of the earth, and we know that He will bless us. That is the foundation of prayer. So often when we pray, we pray out of profound uncertainty.

It is important for us to recognize that prayer is a vital link between the believer and God. There is no point in praying if you do not intend to make contact with God. It is a waste of time. RC Sproul made the most interesting analogy in a different context. He was in conversation with a gentlemen who said to RC; “Here’s a little exercise RC. What I want you to do is to take a moment and write down the five greatest compliments you have ever received.” If you know RC Sproul you know he has gotten a lot of compliments. He wrote them down and they discussed them. The man asked, “Are these the best compliments that you ever got?” RC said, no, there are some other ones that were more extensive. Well why didn’t you write them down? Well, RC said, I didn’t believe them even when they said them.” And neither does God. If we come to God and we say what are appropriate things, but we don’t mean them... God has no need for our flattery. What God wants is us!

So prayer is very serious business. It is not serious because you have to be some gigantic Bible scholar, or eloquent. It is serious because you have to be real. There are other names in the Bible for those who merely flatter. You can figure them out.

Prayer is a vital link between the believer and God. This is what Peter says in I Peter 4:7, *“...be self-controlled and sober-minded...”* Why? *“...for the sake of your prayers.”* He goes on in 5:6-7 to say this, *“Humble yourselves therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”* For many today the deep seriousness of prayer is obscured. If that is so, I think it indicates our vision of God is vague. Peter goes on in verses 8-11 with this exhortation. *“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks the oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”*

I mentioned to my wife what had been mentioned at the conference. Do you know what the two number 1 reasons are why people don’t go to church? (This may not be the truth because people don’t often tell the truth so you don’t know how true this is, but this what they said in the survey.) Why do most people who don’t go to church decide not to go to church, even if they are Christians, so called? Well, the number one reason why people don’t end up going to church is because the people who do go to church aren’t friendly. That is the number one reason. The second one is that they find church boring. Now that is very interesting. When we gather together, our conviction and our expectation is that God is with us. How boring would it be if Jesus walked through the back door right now? That would not be boring at all! The

fact of the matter is that He already has. Consequently, if you haven't noticed Him, the problem does not lie with where He is, but where you are. That is a very different matter indeed.

In the context of the [Ligonier] conference [which in part deals with the drastic loss of doctrinal content and integrity by so many churches in America], honesty compels all of us to recognize that there are many assemblies where Jesus is barely present, and that is another matter, but not to be addressed today.

Clearly, you see, Peter sees the life of the church as simply being filled with the presence of God. Notice again, consider the words that he said: “If you talk...”—he's not talking about me, by the way, not only about me. It is not just the preacher who speaks the words of God. This is addressed to all. Speak as if you expected, anticipated, believed, knew it to be true and wanted it to be true that God will speak through you. That your words will convey God's purpose and meaning and blessing to someone else! Why not? That is the question, right? Why come here and spend fifteen minutes grumbling about last week: what a waste! Determine on your way to church that you will bless. There's a thought, that you will bless. Why not? Peter says, “. . .we serve in the strength which God supplies, we speak as if God himself was speaking.” We are sober-minded because we know that whether or not other people receive God's word is a life and death issue. That is why we are sober-minded.

Peter also said in those few words that we are to cast all our anxieties on the Lord. We do that by prayer. He says that we are to affirm and open our hearts to our solidarity with the people of God. This is like Nehemiah. What we are exposed to here is whether or not it is a matter of the heart as it communes with God that we identify with God's people. Or, do we arrive encased in the shell of personal preoccupations so that we move through the rest of the crowd but we're not ever actually in touch with them. We are shielded away and so there is no communion, there is no fellowship of the heart, there is no interconnection. Consequently there is no spiritual growth either, for there can't be, if you read the New Testament and you understand that we grow as we serve in the power of the Spirit to seek others in the body as well as in the community as we have opportunity to see others blessed by God as we exercise our spiritual gifts. If it doesn't happen, you don't grow. So we are sober-minded for our prayers. Sobriety here is not glum, it is just serious! The heart of our fellowship with God in the Spirit is prayer. I know that there are some people who pray for these services before they begin. On some occasions we have spoken of having people pray through the service. I would highly value that, if three or four or five people from this congregation would do that. It is good to have three or four or five people praying continuously. Why? Because it is the Spirit of God that accomplishes the work that God wants to have done. And if you don't think there is different spirit here than just the Holy Spirit, you have not yet understood. And so there is a war going on. I would like to see some warriors, because I need that; I need it while I work in the week and I need it when I open my mouth because every now and then you [just] hear me, and that is very dangerous thing to hear!

In these matters, you get the picture – I hope you begin to understand – in these matters sincerity of intent is not sufficient. You can be absolutely certain that when Nehemiah walked into the presence of Artaxerxes and he knew his head was on the line he was very sincere: “Help!” But that did not determine who would answer or to whom his heart would respond. That was a matter that had to have been settled beforehand. So too with us! This is what Paul said – I have made reference to this before and I will make reference to it again, because it is so critical. Hear carefully what the Spirit had Paul write the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10. *“The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing. . .”* – are you listening? – *“...because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.”* I will take just a moment to expand that an essential little bit. Obviously here the issue is loving the truth. There is no question that he is talking about

the revealed truth of God. Notice that he said “...so be saved.” It is essential to recognize that throughout the New Testament the word “salvation”, the concept and reality of salvation, always has three tenses. We have been saved if we have closed with God with faith in Jesus Christ, called justification. But that is not the end. We are also being saved, day by day through our walk, we are being saved from the dominating power of sin within us and sin without us that constantly seeks to drag us away and pull us down and render us useless in the things of God, and, by the way, being ultimately miserable. Let me rephrase that: miserable in the meantime and desperately miserable in the end when we realize we have nothing to give to our God. Lastly, we shall be saved. This is a reference to our glorification. The day will come when this life’s struggle is over and the whole victory of our Lord Jesus Christ is known, and we then are washed clean of every remainder of sin and we will be with Christ in glory! Amen. That is the hope that should animate us at all times.

Let us pray: our gracious heavenly Father, thank you for your goodness to us that You sent your Son. He poured out His blood and rescued us from our all too deserved death. Now we have received life, and with that life is hope and joy and in that joy, perseverance for the glory of Your name. In Jesus we pray, amen.

Questions for Discussion and Application:

1. What are the kinds of prayer that you are familiar with and use? What might be the significance or point in having this variety?
2. Why is it needful and wise to be sober-minded when we pray?
3. Do you experience prayer as a means of solidarity with other Christians? Do you experience it as a means of fellowship or communion with God?
4. What most often leads or brings you to prayer? Alternately, for what sorts of things are you most apt to pray?
5. What stands out to you in Nehemiah’s prayer recorded in Nehemiah 1:5-11? Do you or do you think you could pray in same way he did? Do you think it would be helpful?
6. Reflecting on 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10, why is sincerity of intent not sufficient for effective prayer, and why is truth so necessary?
7. Why is it helpful and important for us to be clear that the Spirit is sent to help us pray, not to pray instead of us?
8. The difference between a wish and a conviction is clear enough. What might it take for someone to pray with conviction? Do you think conviction is needful if we are to pray boldly or with confidence?

9. Do you think God wants/ expects you to have a more focused and vibrant prayer life? How might this affect your life? What steps will you take to deepen your prayer life?