

Mission, Values and Vision

*⁸To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.
(Ephesians 3:8-10. ESV)*

Message 4

Prayer

February 9th, 2014

Revelation 8:1-5

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Acts 12:5

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Revelation 8:1-5. Today we are going to be looking at our third Core Value and some of the Scripture passages which inform it. I want to approach things a little differently this morning. In weeks past we have read one Scripture and dealt with it at length in terms of how it informs our Core Values and then at the end we have connected the dots from conviction to practice. This morning I want to assume that you can connect the dots more or less on your own. Whatever we see in Scripture this morning is going to explain to you why it is that we pray so much in this church. We have 9 weekly prayer groups, we have Prayer Weeks and we have prayer partners in this church. We pray in the service, before the service and with people at the front of the church after the service. That's a lot of prayer and really today we're just trying to answer the question: Why do we pray so much in this church? Why is prayer so important to everybody around here? The answer is in this Core Value; we pray in this church because:

We deeply believe that prayer connects us to God's purpose, peace and power for life and ministry.

My intention this morning is to look one text for each of those three things – a passage on how prayer connects us to God's purpose, one on how it connects us to God's peace and one on how it

connects us to God's power for life and ministry. Let's begin with how prayer connects us to God's purpose.

Prayer Connects Us To God's Purpose

Let me read to you from the text you have open before you; Revelation 8:1-5. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

Revelation 8:1-5 (ESV)

¹ When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

² Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

³ And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne,

⁴ and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

⁵ Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

The Book of Revelation contains a series of visions that were given to the Apostle John while he was in prison on the Isle of Patmos. Visions are different than epistles. Epistles are pretty straight forward – Paul or Peter or John writes to a church and says: “Hey! That guy who is living with his father’s wife – tell him to knock it off that’s sinful and unacceptable. Also, here is how you should do communion...” Most of Paul’s epistles start with some theology and then end with some straight forward, practical teaching, that’s why pastors love to preach on them. Revelation is totally different. Everything comes in symbol and vision and it is easy to go sideways and miss the point. The message in this text is about how the purposes of God in wrath and redemption are loosed upon the earth in response to the prayers of God’s people. In terms of context, John has just related a series of overlapping visions describing how the purposes of God in wrath and redemption will be worked out on the earth in the time between the ascension and the return of Jesus Christ. He has been doing this by means of a symbol – a scroll that is sealed with 7 seals.

Think of it this way. Imagine a book – we think in terms of books not scrolls so imagine a book with big, glossy, pictures – kind of like a children’s book with nice thick almost cardboard pages. This book contains the story of how God will divide all people by the Gospel of Christ and work out purposes of wrath and redemption upon the earth. However, between each of the pages of the book there is a big glob of wax. The pages are sealed. Then, one after the other the seals are

broken and the story unfolds. Now, in Revelation chapter 8 we have the unsealing of the last chapter. This last chapter is described using another series of 7s – this time 7 trumpets. Trumpets in the Bible announce impending judgment or deliverance. They are associated with last things or final things. The last and 7th chapter of the book has 7 pages, if you will symbolizing God’s completed and perfect purpose upon the earth.

Now, what does all of this majestic and exalted drama have to do with prayer? Well, if you were reading closely you noticed that actually, it has EVERYTHING to do with prayer – that’s what is so amazing about this passage! We learn 3 things about the incredible place of prayer in the outworking of God’s purpose from this passage, let me show them to you quickly.

First, we see that:

1. The prayers of God’s people are valued and prized in the heavens

Look again at verse 1:

¹ When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, **there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.**

If you know your Bibles you know that heaven is not usually silent is it? What is normally going on in heaven? SINGING!! Three chapters earlier John says:

Revelation 5:11-14 (ESV)

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,

¹² saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

There is constant worship in heaven and apparently it is very loud!! Heaven is NOISY with the praise of the angels but here, in Revelation 8, as the final purposes of God in wrath and redemption are contemplated, everything goes quiet; what are they listening for? The prayers of the saints!! Leon Morris says it this way:

The saints appear insignificant to men at large. But in the sight of God they matter. Even great cataclysms are held back while they pray. **And the praises of angels give way to silence so that the saints may be heard.**¹

At the start and at the end of this great vision of the scroll we are told that the prayers of the saints are precious and treasured in heaven. In Revelation 5 at the beginning of this scroll story it says:

Revelation 5:8 (ESV)

⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and **golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.**

Golden bowls! Gold is for things that are precious! The prayers of the saints arise before the throne of God and are stored in golden bowls – they are precious in his sight. Listen to me church - your prayers are heard – God will silence the angels to hear what you have to say - and your prayers are treasured.

Secondly, I want you to see that:

2. The prayers of God's people are helped and sanctified in the heavens

Look at verses 3-4:

Revelation 8:3-4 (ESV)

³ And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and **he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints** on the golden altar before the throne,

⁴ and the smoke of the **incense, with the prayers of the saints,** rose before God from the hand of the angel.

Again, this is symbol laden language. Incense in those days was used to mask the smell of everyday life. People didn't shower as often in those days as they do today; they didn't change their clothes as often as we do today so the ancient world had a certain odour to it and so in the homes of the rich and the royal incense was burned to beautify the air, if you will. Because God is King over all creation we are not surprised to meet this symbol of incense in the heavenly throne room, but what does it mean to communicate? It is not there because angels are smelly. That isn't the function in this story – the incense isn't associated with the person of the angel it is associated with the prayers of the saints. The text is saying that the prayers of the saints, which

¹ Leon Morris, Revelation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 116.

are very earthy and imperfect are helped and sanctified in the heavens. This isn't new information, this is the consistent teaching of Scripture:

Romans 8:26 (ESV)

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

Hear that Christian! Your prayers may be weak but your help is strong in the heavens! The Spirit himself overlays his prayers with ours and there is One who stands in heaven ever before the Father to make intercession for us; Hebrews 7 says of Jesus:

Hebrews 7:25 (ESV)

²⁵Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

The Spirit helps us when we pray and Jesus adds his intercession on top of ours – no wonder it is said that prayer can move mountains! The prayers of the saints are greatly helped in heaven.

Thirdly, we see that:

3. The prayers of God's people are powerful and effective in summoning God's purpose upon the earth

Look at verses 4-5:

Revelation 8:4-5 (ESV)

⁴and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

⁵Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

When the prayers of the saints have been fully gathered, when they have risen before the face of God, an angel goes forth and fills the censor with fire and casts it upon the earth with powerful and EARTHSHAKING EFFECT. That's symbol laden language but the meaning is not hard to figure out. Clearly the vision means to communicate that God has ordained to unleash the last chapter of his purposes of wrath and redemption upon the earth IN RESPONSE to the prayers of his people. He's waiting. He's sitting and watching and waiting until the bowl is filled to the line with the prayers of his people and when its full, it is mingled with the help of heaven and it

risers before him and in that moment, once again, the Lord remembers the bondage of his people and moves to save. We've seen this movie before haven't we Bible readers? When God first moved to redeem his people we read much the same:

Exodus 2:23-25 (ESV)

²³ During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. **Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God.**

²⁴ And **God heard** their groaning, and **God remembered** his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

²⁵ **God saw** the people of Israel—**and God knew.**

Do you see that? Exact same scenario! As it was at the first so shall it be at the last! God will hear our cry for rescue! God will hear and when our prayers, gathered and treasured and stored in the throne room of God – when that bowl is full and when those prayers are poured God will hear and remember and see and know and we will be delivered. God will come, he will part the skies and he will come. As it was at the first so shall it be at the last. The purposes of God will descend, the enemies of God's people will be crushed and all God's children SET FREE and all of it, in response to prayer. God has ordained to act on the earth in response to prayer. He has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. Blessed be the Name of the Lord!

Now, that is the most important thing we believe about prayer. That is why the Lord's Prayer is the most dangerous and subversive force on the earth. Our Father, who art in heaven, HALLOWED BE THY NAME. THY KINGDOM COME. THY WILL BE DONE. Every time you pray that prayer its like a bead of water dropped in the bowl and the water inches closer to the line. Not one of those prayers falls to the ground. Every one is heard and stored and sanctified and helped. And yet, in the meantime we can and do and should pray for daily bread, for comfort and forgiveness – for peace and for power for life and ministry. And so we'll take a few minutes and look at those things as well. We deeply believe that prayer also connects us to God's peace. Open your Bibles now to 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

Prayer Connects Us To God's Peace

The Apostle Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (ESV)

⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given

me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, **I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.** For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Our purpose is not to say everything that can be said about this passage but rather to mine it for the insights it would yield with respect to prayer.² Let me draw them to the surface. First of all, we notice that:

1. Prayer is not always effective in alleviating pain and suffering

There is a play on words in the Greek that does not cross over into English. In verse 7 Paul says that the concern of God was that he not be *huperairomai* – you can hear bits of two English words in there; “hyper” and “air”. The word literally means “lifted up too much in the air”, we translate it in English as “exalted” but Paul literally says that in order that he not be lifted up in the air too much, God stuck him with a stake. That’s what the word translated as “thorn” can also mean. It means “thorn” and “stake” equally so the play on words means that to keep him from floating away with pride as an apostle God nailed his foot to the floor by way of physical infirmity. Now, we don’t know what it was specifically – Paul seems to assume that the Corinthians know. Many historians think it refers to Paul’s degenerative eye problem. Paul has a secretary write a lot of his letters and then signs them at the end in big clunky letters and he talks about how people who love him would have given them their eyes so we assume that Paul was going blind. That would certainly keep your pride in check but it would also be a bit of a barrier in ministry so Paul prays for deliverance. He prays for healing. Three times. And God says no. Instead he says:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

² Paul is writing to the Corinthian church and is attempting to combat an unhealthy attachment they have developed to some self styled “Super Apostles”. These men are false teachers and claim to have a charismatic authority and a superabundance of prophetic insight but they do not teach according to the Apostolic doctrine. These false teachers have been attempting to pry the Corinthian sheep away from their founder and shepherd the apostle Paul partly by claiming that he lacks charismatic flair – he is really just a dry and dusty Bible teacher. Few are his revelations and small is his power, goes the argument. In response Paul does something really odd. He tells a story about how he was unable through prayer to heal even himself – now, this is not to say that Paul was not used of God to heal, we know that he was, that’s what is so interesting. He doesn’t match charismatic story for charismatic story, instead he tells a story of a time when he couldn’t heal and his prayers were not effective. He is trying to teach the Corinthians about how character is more important than charisma and godliness more important than giftedness, particularly with respect to leaders in the church, but along the way he teaches some very useful things about prayer.

The Greek word translated as weakness there is *astheneiais* and is rendered as weakness 14 times in the NASB and 9 times as some form of illness or disease. Think of it as a big category word that would include a variety of infirmities from which you might pray to be delivered. Paul prayed for deliverance and God said no. Prayer is not always effective in alleviating pain and suffering. I know that some pastors in this town preach the exact opposite, but if they do, they are preaching something other than the clear message of the Bible.

Secondly, I want you to see that:

2. Persistence in prayer is not always appropriate

In verse 8 Paul says:

⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

⁹But he said to me ... Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

I prayed 3 times, God said no, therefore I will be happy with what I have. That's it. He doesn't name it and claim it. He doesn't call into being things that are not. He doesn't keep knock, knock, on heaven's door. He just stops. And embraces his suffering as God's will for his life. There is a time to stop asking. Now – there is also a time NOT to stop asking, there is a time to press through and so we need to be discerning; generally speaking, persistence is really important, but it has to be balanced with humility and discernment. Sometimes we have to be wise enough to stop praying for healing and to start praying for strength and for endurance and for witness in our suffering.

Third and last, I want you to see that:

3. Prayer is not always about changing circumstances sometimes it's about changing us

Paul says:

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, **I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.** For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Look there at the end of verse 9 where it says ‘that the power of Christ may rest on me’. The Greek word translated as “may rest on me” is *episkenose*; it is the word for “tent” or “tabernacle” from the Greek version of the Old Testament, specifically Exodus 40:34. This was the word used to describe when God came and took up residence in the very centre of his people. So, basically Paul is saying, “I didn’t get the change in circumstances I was asking for. I asked for a healing and God said no. But saying no, he didn’t walk away, he sat with me in my unchanged circumstance and he clothed me with power and grace. I am now honestly glad for this suffering for it has become for me the presence of Almighty God.”

Have you ever heard someone talk like that? I have. Carolyn Jones shared her testimony at the Wednesday service of Prayer Week and she said exactly that. She became very sick with a liver problem and she prayed but she still had to go into the hospital for some pretty scary treatments. Her doctors, both Christian men, prayed with her before putting her into a dark and scary tube and she literally felt God entering into her suffering and clothing her with power. So real, so impacting was this grace that she said in her testimony: “I’d give anything to go back to that place again”. Pain and suffering and sickness had become for her the threshold of Presence. Karen Stevens said the same thing when she gave her testimony. She spoke of how in the very midst of her horrible car accident, she literally felt the arms of God around her and it was beautiful.

Church, healing is a gift and we should pray for it as commanded in James 5 and we should rejoice when it is given. God is kind, bless his Name. But. Sometimes in his wisdom and foresight he will not give it but he does not leave us alone. He sits with us in our suffering and he clothes us with the peace and power of Jesus Christ. Sometimes prayer changes things and sometimes it changes us.

Lastly then and very quickly, we also believe that prayer connects us to God’s power for life and ministry. This is what is normally taught when prayer is the subject of the sermon and so it is good that we left it to the end and we can treat it now more briefly than those things we have said thus far.

Prayer Connects Us To God’s Power For Life And Ministry

Turn in your Bibles to Acts 12:5. Many of you know this story I'm sure. The Apostle James has been executed, the Apostle Peter has been arrested and the church is obviously concerned that he will be killed as well so they hold a prayer meeting and their prayers are miraculously effective. An angel is dispatched from heaven to release Peter and he comes to the place of the prayer meeting to let them know that he has been delivered. There is a 1 verse description of that prayer meeting that we are very interested in as we too would like to pray in such a way as to be connected to God's power for life and ministry. Let me read it to you:

Acts 12:5 (NASB)

⁵So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.

There does seem to be something of a basic template offered here for powerful prayer. We might say that powerful prayer is: fervent, specific, rightly directed and corporate. Let me say just a word or two about each.

1. Powerful prayer is fervent

The ESV renders that as "earnest" but "fervent" is better. The Greek word is *ektenos* which means a prolonged, focused and intense time of prayer. When you really need to access power and pull down strongholds or open shut doors then you need fervent prayer. You may need an all night, focused and intense time of prayer.

Secondly,

2. Powerful prayer is specific

The text says that this fervent time of prayer was "for him", that is "for Peter". It wasn't a general prayer meeting, it was focused. Now, again, there is value in a general prayer meeting – we have 9 of them. But there is POWER in getting a bunch of people together to all pray for 1 thing. I remember when we gathered as a church to pray for Ashleigh Winder. That was powerful prayer – it was fervent and it was specific. We weren't praying for our children in general, we were praying for this particular child that she would wake from her coma and retain

her full mental faculties. Both of those prayers, as you will recall, were graciously answered. Powerful prayer is specific.

Thirdly,

3. Powerful prayer is rightly directed

The text says that their prayers were directed “to God”. That may not sound like much, but it ought to. You need to pray to the God who is there. If you don’t know the real God, if you worship Santa Jesus or the God of your own imagination then you will not experience power in prayer. Orthodox theology is not everything, but it is not nothing, that’s for sure. You have to know the real God through faith in the real Christ and you have to be filled with the real Holy Spirit to have power in prayer and deceptions abound in the modern day church so we pass over this one to our peril.

Lastly,

4. Powerful prayer is corporate

Prayer was made “for Peter”, “unto God”, “by the church”. I am not saying that personal prayer is not important – it is. I am not saying that family prayer is not important – it is. What I am saying is that there is something POWERFUL about corporate prayer. When you get a church full of people praying for something, you can almost feel the ground shake. We’ve experienced that a few times in this place but it doesn’t happen everyday, largely because there is nothing harder in our culture then getting people to believe that group matters. “I’ll pray at home” or “in the shower” or “in my car on the way to work” we say. Well and good, but when God’s people get together to pray, the ground shakes, the earth trembles and angels are dispatched from heaven to set the prisoners free. Powerful prayer is corporate prayer.

This is why we pray in this church and this is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

