

Women's Bible Study Winter/Spring 2010
The Heart's Cry: A Look at Heartfelt Prayer
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The Heart's Cry for Faith
Mark 9: 17-29
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It was 15 months ago that I sketched out the idea for this study. John and I were away for five days at a retreat house for pastors and their wives, and we spent every evening in a room set aside for study and prayer, both of us reading, working and praying. I've thought for some time that prayer, one of the core values of this church, still seems like something we'd rather have someone else do. How many of us have felt awkward praying out loud in a small group? Many of us go for long periods of time without any sort of prayer except a blessing at mealtimes or a short prayer at bedtime. Yet the prayers we read in the Bible are the heart's cries for deliverance, or obedience, or faith.

Even though we'll spend most of our time looking at specific prayers situations drawn from both Old and New Testaments, I think many of us have some big questions about prayer. So let's start by answering:

I. Some Big Questions About Prayer

The first is

A. What is prayer?

The simplest definition is probably "conversation with God."

Now a conversation has two parts. A good conversationalist both speaks and listens. There is a back and forth rhythm that allows both people to take part – one person doesn't monopolize it and both parties stay interested. So if we apply the rules of good conversation to prayer, we understand that we shouldn't blurt out every single thing in our heads to God, then rush off until the next time we feel the need to vent. Rather, in prayer we listen for God as well as talk. We seek his viewpoint, not just tell him ours.

Another description of prayer is "practicing the presence of God."

In this word picture prayer becomes a way of acknowledging that God is with us at all times, and is interested in us. Similarly, we should be aware of his presence and seek his views on what we're doing.

Understanding prayer in this way helps us to remember that we are never alone. Just as we wouldn't do certain things when our mother is in the room, we begin to understand that some behavior is not very appropriate when Christ is in the room with us. So practicing the presence of God serves as a curb to sin.

But it also helps us combat loneliness. If we can always resume that interior conversation with God, it gives us less dependence on human relationships. They may or may not be there. But God is always ready to pick up where that last conversation left off.

Prayer could also be described as “trusting God for our needs.”

Last Friday at Schaeffer Academy where I work we had a farewell for someone who has been really important in the life of the school. Erika Kelly is a member of Autumn Ridge and of this Bible study. But for almost 15 years she and her husband Jim were volunteers at the school, affecting students and parents and faculty in a wonderful and godly way.

Part of the farewell included having Erika visit the elementary classrooms. In the fourth grade classroom, the children sat down and prayed for her. Now you might think that a bunch of 9 year olds would find public prayer awkward. But no, there they were, saying simple but honest things in a way that left me humbled by their easy access to God the Father. It was clear that these children were comfortable praying, used to bringing their concerns to God and confident that God would hear and answer their prayers. Jesus said, **“Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn’t receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:14-15)**

Now if prayer is conversation with God, we should remember that conversation is the main means by which we conduct relationships. It’s how we get closer to another person.

John and I spend a lot of time talking each day. One of the reasons we enjoy walking together so much is that we are able to converse and walk at the same time. But winter has been pretty cold lately and walking outside is not very much fun right now. Then kids came home from college and I spent a lot of time talking to them. Plus it was very busy for us during the Christmas season with lots of events at our house. A few days after Christmas I realized that I was completely out of touch with my husband – not in a good way, either, but in a snappish sort of cranky way where we hadn’t had the chance to talk about some important issues. He even mentioned politely that I’d been rather short with him lately. Fortunately, last fall I had scheduled a 24 hour getaway at Elizabeth Lodge for us, and even though I went there with lots to do hanging over me, I was able to ignore it all and enjoy the calm beauty of the place. We went for a long walk, restored our ongoing conversation, got back into our normal rhythms of relationship.

I’m afraid this is a really common pattern for marriage. There are times when family life sort of overwhelms everyone and work intrudes so that the people you love most get shorted – of your attention, of your conversation, of your acts of service that convey love to them. However, I’m telling you this story not to make a point about marriage, but about conversation, because it is the channel by which our love is conveyed to each other. When we talk together it keeps us up to date on each other’s life. We start working in tandem again.

If prayer is conversation, it is not small talk between two strangers. Rather, like a strong marriage, it is a conversation of love between two parties who are intimately known to each other. Love shrivels when it is not fed by contact. Our prayer conversation with God needs to be ongoing so that we are listening when he speaks to us.

Of course, this conversation of love is not between two equals, but between us as creatures and God as the creator of the universe. Yet Jesus told us **“But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows.” (Luke 10:29-31)** So this Creator, who is profoundly beyond us in power and glory, still knows us individually and intimately. But do we know him? Only through prayer.

Another big question we have about prayer is

B. What happens when we pray?

We know that something important is happening because Jesus taught about prayer, and he modeled it continually in his own life. Just to take one example:

“Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” (Luke 18:1)

The parable that follows is less important than the introduction. We should always pray and not lose heart. Always pray and never give up. That verse alone tells us that prayer is doing something in us and to us that makes us able to cope with an impossible situation.

We pray because we are commanded to. We pray because the needs of our lives are beyond our power to solve, and prayer connects us with the One who can solve all things. And we pray, because in prayer, we see God acting.

Now as to whether our prayers cause God to act in a certain way, or whether prayer works by causing our wills to become aligned with God’s purpose, is an area of some mystery. And that’s all right. Because in faith there are some things we should not try to reduce to a simple statement. We’re limited because we’re finite, and we’re trying to comprehend something infinite. But it seems to me that God, being sovereign, knows what he’s going to do, and therefore, when we see him acting in response to our prayers for a certain outcome, it is likely that we have grown close enough to him to be praying for what he intends to do. Prayer is not a magic wand that we wave to get God to do what we want. Rather, it’s a privileged intimacy that allows us to see what he’s working on, and makes us long to join with him as we align our wills with his purposes.

It is simply thrilling to pray for a specific outcome and then to see, against all the odds, God bringing it about. And how often, because we are not praying, do we miss what he’s doing all around us? How about the narrow escape from death that we don’t even realize he averted? Prayer opens our eyes to see how God is working. It’s not a means of getting God to do our will on earth, but rather it’s a means of getting God’s will done on earth.

If it wasn’t so important, so fundamental to our spiritual health, we wouldn’t be commanded to pray.

“Pray continually.” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

My great hope for this study is that we will walk away learning to see prayer as our first resort, not our last resort. That prayer will be our initial, kneejerk response to sorrow, to joy, to beauty, to loss. Imagine if each one of us here learned to “pray continually”. What great things would God be able to do through us when our wills came into alignment with his purposes through prayer?

So that is some background on prayer itself. And as we go through this series we'll try to answer as many questions about prayer as we can through the passages we'll encounter.

Today we are in the gospel of Mark, chapter 9, looking at a story I've called "The Heart's Cry for Faith."

II. The Heart's Cry for Faith

This story takes place immediately after the Transfiguration, where Peter, James and John have just seen a glimpse of Jesus' heavenly glory. It's an amazing experience, and they are overawed and terrified. But, just as we find after a spiritual high, real life very quickly intervenes, and now they have to deal with an antagonistic crowd at the bottom of the mountain. The rest of the disciples, who have remained with the crowd below, are found arguing with the Jewish scribes. Let's pick up the story in Mark 9:15, where we see that

A. Jesus calms the crowd

"When the crowd saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with awe, and they ran to greet him.

'What is all this arguing about?' Jesus asked.

Some speculate that Jesus' appearance had changed in some way because of the Transfiguration. Remember that when Moses spoke with God (Exodus 34:29) his face glowed after each encounter. Perhaps Jesus' face still had some of that unearthly splendor.

But it could have been simply that the crowd recognized Jesus as someone remarkable who did miracles, and for that reason they were 'overwhelmed with awe.'

In verses 17 and 18 a man in the crowd explains that he brought his young son to be healed, because he is possessed by an evil spirit who will not let him speak, and who causes all sorts of violence to the boy's body. And the disciples failed to heal him.

So

B. Jesus challenges the man

"You faithless people! How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

So they brought the boy. But when the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth.

'How long as this been happening?' Jesus asked the boy's father.

He replied, 'Since he was a little boy. The spirit often throws him into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us, if you can.'

'What do you mean, "If I can"?' Jesus asked. 'Anything is possible if a person believes.'

The father instantly cried out, 'I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!'

Jesus' statement of exasperation in v. 19 seems out of character, until we realize it was directed at the disciples. They had every tool they needed in order to deliver this boy. Instead, they have failed; the father is discouraged; the boy is still in bondage; God has not been glorified but instead has been made to look ineffectual. Jesus knows that there is only a short time until the disciples will be without him, after his death and resurrection. Will they be able to do what he has taught them? Will they remember that the conduit for power is prayer?

But the man is the one who gains here. In response to his honest statement "I believe, but I am struggling with unbelief" Jesus instantly does something that increases his faith. Jesus always acts in response to the heart's cry of faith, because anyone who makes such a statement shows they are already being drawn to God in salvation.

Next,

C. Jesus controls the demon

By this time the crowd was growing and Jesus needed to take charge of the situation and control the demon. Look at v. 25:

"Listen, you spirit that makes this boy unable to hear and speak," he said. "I command you to come out of this child and never enter him again!" Then the spirit screamed and threw the boy into another violent convulsion and left him. The boy appeared to be dead. A murmur ran through the crowd as people said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet, and he stood up. (Mark 9:25-27)

We live in a culture where demon possession is not common. But that doesn't mean it has disappeared. In countries like Guinea or Haiti, for example, missionaries will see cases that cannot be explained in any other way. In many denominations there is a quiet ministry of deliverance to release people who have come in contact with demonic power. But we need to remember that this story demonstrates the triumph of Christ over all demons, and to recall that Christians belonging to Jesus cannot be possessed by a demon. That was true then, and it's true today.

Commonly, Jesus addressed demons either by name or by their function. And in this case he calls the demon "spirit that makes this boy unable to hear and speak" (NLT), or in the NIV, "You deaf and mute spirit". It's important to see that Jesus always holds the trump card over Satan. There is never a single instance where Satan or his followers can get the upper hand on Christ. They can do mischief and destruction, but it's important to remember that the overall battle is won, and not even Satan can win a faceoff with Christ.

The Bible occasionally refers to diseases such as "seizures" which we can assume are conventional epilepsy. But in this case, the scripture is quite specific about this boy's trouble being caused by demon possession, not illness. And once the demon is gone – not very willingly, I might add! – the child is cured.

There's an epilogue, though. Look at v. 28, where we see how:

D. Jesus converses about prayer

“Afterward, when Jesus was alone in the house with his disciples, they asked him, ‘Why couldn’t we cast out that evil spirit?’ Jesus replied, ‘This kind can be cast out only by prayer.’ (Mark 9:28-29)

The disciples were puzzled about their failure to heal the boy. Jesus reminds them in v. 29: “This kind can be cast out only by prayer.” You see, the disciples had gotten used to having the power and were beginning to forget that the power did not reside IN them, but merely worked THROUGH them. It wasn’t their power, but Christ’s. And unless they opened the conduit for that power through prayer, then they would not be able to accomplish great things.

The disciples, however, had been commissioned to have authority over demons in Jesus’ name (Mark 3:15) and had successfully done so in Mark 6:13. They went on to do amazing things in the book of Acts. So it wasn’t that they were incapable always, but that they were incapable on this one day – because of their lack of prayer.

All of us have spiritual gifts. But these gifts are given by the Father for his glory, and for the building up of the church. So if we start to think that we own that gift, whether it’s an ability to teach, or sing, or organize, we will very quickly end up like the disciples – unable to succeed. This story is a good reminder to pray for the ability to do the tasks he gives us, no matter how many times we have done them before.

So in the end, this story is as much about the disciples learning an important point about prayer – which is that you have to rely on it if you are going to accomplish anything of spiritual importance – as it is about the father of the boy discovering that even weak faith can be turned to strong by Christ. The heart’s cry of faith starts with a little prayer and witnesses great things. The heart’s cry of faith relies on God to do his works through us, through prayer.

But the story still begs for some answers. And I’ve called this last section:

III. The Heart’s Cry for Answers

because we long to know what is happening.

What does prayer really do? In this case,

A. How did it change the outcome?

Here we get into the mystery of prayer. When we pray, do we change what would have happened? My understanding of the sovereignty of God tells me that God knows what he intends to do all along. But that through prayer, he makes us partners and, in a sense, co-laborers with his purpose. He wants us to pray, and the wonder of prayer is not so much that it changes his intended outcome, but that it changes our understanding and will to align with his. Then, instead of praying for something that God knows would be wrong for us, we pray for what he already desires for us. When we pray like that, we glorify God, and we see amazing outcomes.

Let me give you an example of how I was changed by prayer recently.

Last summer I spent months praying for peace. I felt unsettled because of the stage of life we are entering, with adult children whose lives are changing all the time, facing an empty nest later in 2010. So I prayed every day that I would be peaceful. Instead, my life became filled with even more turmoil. Along about September I began to recognize that what I had really wanted from God was a peaceful life. But he had answered my prayer literally by giving me a changing, unsettling

life filled with inner peace and direction about how to deal with the external problems. My prayer was definitely answered, yet not at all in the way I expected. It was answered by changing by my ability to cope – by giving me true peace in the midst of turmoil. I might have preferred the peaceful life, but in the end I got a far greater gift in learning how to cope peacefully with turbulence.

John Piper says that the great value of prayer is that it changes the wills of those praying, and those being prayed for. And those changed wills are where we see the effect of our prayers, in a way that glorifies God and teaches us to rely on him. A successful experience of prayer teaches us to make it our first resort, instead of our last one. We can be sure that prayer changes things - but it might be us that it's changing rather than the situation.

Another question:

B. How did it change the man?

Now the mystery of prayer becomes clearer. The anguished father prays, **“I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)**. And what happens? He instantaneously sees Jesus cure his son; he sees Jesus answer his doubts, by showing that even a little faith demonstrated through prayer can be a catalyst for a miracle.

Imagine the next time that man is in a crisis. He will turn to Jesus, won't he. That one answered prayer taught him that prayer works. And he will be changed forever because of the heart's cry of faith.

That is why the prayer of faith is so important. It's the very first step towards powerful, lifechanging prayer. But remember how he got there. The man came looking for help from Jesus' representatives – the disciples. And he was bitterly disappointed at their failure to help him, so he battled on through until he met with Jesus face to face. Often we put the church, or other Christians in the place of Christ. We look to them to do what only Christ can do, whether that is to be perfect, or to do miracles, or even to rise above our fallen nature. And then we are crushed when they don't meet our expectations. If, like this poor father, we are willing to press on through our disillusionment with the followers of Christ and stand face to face with Jesus himself, we will never be disappointed. The church will always be flawed until Christ returns. If we find ourselves disappointed with Christians or disillusioned with the church, we must go straight to Jesus himself. We should deal directly with him, and extend the grace of forgiveness to others that he has given us.

So the prayer of faith changed the man forever, because it taught him to rely on Christ.

But

C. How does it change us?

Last summer John and I stayed on the Isle of Wight, off the coast of England. While visiting a lovely village we heard the church bells ringing changes. That means that the six bells in the steeple were being rung in a set of mathematical patterns which gradually change. You can tell how good the bellringers are by how fast, and how smoothly, the changes are rung. We walked up to the church to see what was going on. We were met at the door and asked, just audibly over the noise of the bells, “Bellringers?” We nodded, and they sent us upstairs to the tower where six sweaty people were pulling on the ropes that move the great bells above them. The bells clamored and pealed above us, nearly deafening, but the ringers were smooth and speedy.

Bell ringing is pretty amazing. The bells themselves can weigh up to 4 tons, and are balanced so that a reasonably healthy person can pull on the ropes and make the bell sound. They often follow a mathematical pattern like this and at times the ringers call out a name, like “Triple Bob Minor” to switch the pattern. This group was ringing a full peal – all the possible patterns which can be rung with six bells - which totals 720 changes.

Now to John and I, this was a complete mystery. Here was this group of people making an amazing sound in complete accord with each other, simply by pulling on ropes. They were communicating through the bells, and the joyous effect could be heard miles away.

When a new believer first observes prayer it can look as mysterious as bellringing did to us. It looks like you have to be a musical genius, and athletic, to be able to ring. Yet bellringing was traditionally done by the most ordinary people in the village – people of no education, who had the time to practice. The basic idea is quite simple. You count, and pull on a rope. You just have to practice to get good at it. Prayer is similar. It’s a new form of communication which looks mysterious and complicated. To the non Christian it sounds like something that only specialists can do – not normal people. But the basic premise, conversation with God, is beautifully simple.

As it turned out, we weren’t supposed to be in that bell tower at all. It was for participants, not observers, because it was a meeting of ringers from all over the Isle of Wight. But they made us welcome, and answered our questions, and even offered to let us ring in. When someone enters this Bible study, and everything looks strange and unfamiliar, I hope that they will feel as welcome as we did in the bell tower. I hope that each of us will take the time to help the person next to us find the passage we are studying in the Bible and to explain what’s going on and to model prayer in such a way that it’s not daunting, but delightful. Because beginning a life of prayer is deceptively easy. It might begin with a cry from the heart, like the father in this story; it might begin with a simple conversation with God in a group of people like the one we’re in right now. But very soon we will feel at home with it, and eventually we won’t be able to live without it. Prayer changes us by teaching us to think in terms of God’s purposes, not just our own.

Matthew’s version of this story ends with a slightly different statement. When the disciples asked him why they’d failed with the healing Jesus answered: “...**because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.**” (Matthew 17:20-21). Jesus is saying to his disciples, it’s not the AMOUNT of faith you have – it is the OBJECT of your faith that makes it work. That’s why the statement of the man “I believe – help my unbelief” is both honest and effective. It’s like plugging in your laptop instead of trying to run it on a rapidly draining battery. You’ve got infinite resources to run, once the connection is made. Prayer is that conduit, so let’s plug in the connection and see what amazing things God will do through prayer and through us.

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