

# The Power of Faith-Fueled Prayer

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[ 0 : 00 ] So 2012 has been, for Church at the Cross, not only a foundational year, but also a really good year in which we have seen Him bless us.

We have now been meeting for nine months on Sunday mornings for worship in different places, but for nine months total for worship on Sunday mornings. And for almost a year now, we've been meeting in some kind of fashion.

For those of you who were here earlier, we were just having Bible study in the daycare, and then we moved to Sunday morning worship at the country club, and now we're here and excited to be here. But the Lord has done some good things through us and for us and in us throughout that year. And even for those of you who maybe have only been with us for a couple of months or even for a few weeks, it should have become obvious to you by now that our goal as a church is not simply to draw a crowd of people.

Not that that's a bad thing. But our goal is not simply to draw a crowd, but to create and build a church. Our task that we have before us is not to entertain people, but to make disciples of Jesus Christ, all to the glory of God the Father.

[ 1 : 19 ] And that is an altogether supernatural and spiritual work that God himself must do. If God does not do it, then it will not be done.

Now, I know that there is the tendency or maybe even the temptation for churches like ours that hold to a high view, a very high view of the sovereignty of God, to maybe go too far in the opposite direction of those who would try to build up a church and build up a people by their own cleverness and their own abilities and their own schemes, that we might go too far in the opposite direction and begin to think that since the work is God's work, our work is not really all that important, that it doesn't really matter all that much.

But that's not at all what the Scriptures tell us. Yes, God is sovereign over all things. Yes, God accomplishes His will at all times.

He works all things according to the purpose of His will. That's true, but God always accomplishes His sovereign will through the means that He has appointed.

So, suppose for a minute that God, or for some reason, to reveal to you who's going to win the Super Bowl this year. And you knew it infallibly, you knew it for certain, that this particular team, let's say, let's get miraculous, let's say that God reveals to you that the Texans are actually going to win the Super Bowl.

[ 2 : 47 ] Then you know it, and it's certain. So, then would you go to the team, or would you write the letter to the team and say to them, Hey guys, this thing's in the back, so don't worry about practicing. Don't worry about watching game games.

Don't worry about anything else. It's set, it's done. You just do whatever you want to do, and it's yours. Well, of course you wouldn't do that. Because we all know that football games are won by the teams that are well prepared.

They're won by those who practice hard and prepare for the game and show us ready to play. The fact that you know the outcome from the beginning doesn't change the means by which football games are won.

We need to give you a better illustration, a biblical illustration. It's fresh on my mind because Nate and the boys and I actually read this particular story, and I write a story on Friday night.

The story of Abraham. Can you remember how Abraham was called by God, and then he was promised, and God made a covenant with Abraham way back in Genesis chapter 15?

[ 3 : 47 ] But in the midst of that covenant that he made with Abraham, promising him numerous descendants, promising him ownership of the land, he also told Abraham that there would come a

time when he would remove Abraham's descendants from the land of Canaan for 400 years, and put them in slavery in the land of Egypt.

Genesis chapter 15, early on, tells that to Abraham. But you have to fast forward through two generations until, through Isaac, through Jacob, until you get to Jacob's sons, one of whom was Joseph, before you began to see all of those things unfold.

And you know the story of Joseph well. It's one of the best illustrations in all of the Bible, the providence of God. Joseph, who is disliked by his brothers because he's a favor of his father, is sold by the disciples.

And he ends up in the land of Egypt. And of course, through many years of highs and lows, eventually Joseph ends up in a position of authority and power, so that when a famine comes to the Middle East, his family comes looking for aid.

It's a long story, but eventually you know that Joseph does help his brothers, and all of Joseph's brothers and his entire family, so that all the descendants of Abraham through Isaac come to Egypt to stay under the protection of Joseph.

[ 5 : 03 ] But of course, time moves on. Joseph dies. Pharaoh dies. New Pharaoh rises. And the people are enslaved in Egypt for 400 years.

All of those things happen and bring about what God told Abraham what happened in Genesis chapter 15. And I suppose that you could say, well, God had a goal in mind.

He had an end set. And he's such a masterful chess player that he was able to use all of these things, whether they are happenstances or decisions of others, that he was able to use all of these things that really are outside of his control, but he was able to direct and use and put things in place, so that without controlling all the things in the middle, God was able to get the end that he desired.

You could say that, but that's not what the Bible says. In fact, the Bible says the opposite. Hold your place in Mark chapter 11 and turn over to Genesis chapter 45.

In Genesis chapter 45, Joseph, who has by this time in the story been established as an inspired prophet of God, addresses his brothers, and he says this, and he began reading in verse 5.

[ 6 : 18 ] He says, Now, do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here. For God sent me before you to preserve life.

For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five years in which there will be either flowering or harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on the earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

God sent Joseph to Egypt. It wasn't just a happenstance that he ended up in Egypt. God sent him there. And then through all the highs and the lows, as you read through the story, Joseph has extreme lows and extreme highs, and yet there's this refrain throughout the story, and the Lord was with him.

A signal that in all those things, God is working and directing the course of events to get his desired outcome. Not only all that, but God arranges things so that Joseph ends up being like a father to Pharaoh, a lord in power and according over all of Egypt.

[ 7 : 32 ] All of the details, all of the decisions, all of the great moments, all of the tragic moments that led up to that, Joseph said God was working those things. God was behind those things, so that we would end up with the outcome that we have.

See, this is how God operates in the world. He ordains, that is, he plans both the end and the means by which he will accomplish his goals.

That's how he operates. And then you turn to the Gospels, and Jesus has told us. He has said, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

And then he has commanded us to go and make disciples of all the nations. So that Jesus has both said, this is what I'm going to do, and he has told us that I'm going to do it through you.

And so initially Jesus called his apostles and sent them out to plant churches and to write letters for the church and for us now some 2,000 years later.

[ 8 : 38 ] And now he has tasked us with the job of building the church. He's going to do it, and yet he's going to do it through us as we obey the Great Commission. Which means that for us, we need to know the means of God's grace in which we are participants and through which he's going to

build his church so that we can know of our first heart and the work he is.

You want to know what your job is and what Christ is doing in the world? You need to look and see what means of God's grace is he going to use through me, through us, to accomplish his will. And this passage that we're looking at this morning, and the whole Bible really tells us over and over again that one of the primary means that God uses to accomplish his will among his people and in the world is through the prayers of his people.

Now before I show you that in this particular passage, I need to remind you of the connection that's here between these few verses and the broader passage as a whole. If you remember, it's been a few weeks, but I told you a few weeks ago that these stories that happen in chapter 11 of the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple are closely connected.

Especially in the Gospel of Mark, he sandwiches the cleansing of the temple in the middle of the story of the cursing of the fig tree. They are connected. And I told you that when Jesus cleansed the temple and when he ran the money changers out of the temple, he was pronouncing a kind of judgment upon the temple system and religious leaders there in Jerusalem because, Jesus said, the temple has failed to function as God intended it to in the law.

[10:20] The temple has failed to be a house of prayer for all the nations. And so God's judgment is coming upon the temple. And then I also told you that the cursing of the fig tree symbolized that coming judgment upon the temple system and the religious leaders of Jerusalem.

So this entire passage backing all the way up to verse 12 is fueled by this concern for both prayer and with God's judgment.

So we jump in in verse 20 at the end of the story of the fig tree. And it says that as they passed by in the morning, they, that's the disciples, saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.

And Peter remembered and said to him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree that you cursed has withered. You would think that by now, the disciples and Peter would not be shocked that Jesus' word actually brings about the effect that he intended to bring about.

I mean, come on, guys. This is, this is Jesus. They've already seen and learned that he is the divine Messiah. He's the son of David and the son of God. This is the same one who told us that the wind and the waves to stop, and they stopped.

[11:33] This is the same one who told the lame to get up and walk, and then God would walk. He told Lazarus to get up and walk out of the tomb, and the dead man got up and walked out of the tomb. Good grief, this is Jesus.

What he says happens. And yeah, here they are surprised. But Jesus, of course, is not going to waste this teaching moment. He replies to them in verse 22.

He says, Jesus answered them, Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.

Now, when Jesus refers to this mountain, remember that he's standing now, walking along the Mount of Olives. And on a clear day, if you were standing on the top of the Mount of Olives, and it was really clear, you would be able to see the Dead Sea off in a distance.

So this is a very vivid, very real saying that Jesus is giving to his disciples. If you pray and ask God, your words to him will be effective, and he will, through your prayers, even through the mountain that you stand upon, in the sea that you can see over there.

[12:52] Now, I say that this is a prayer, even though Jesus does not specifically say that they're praying, because of what he says at the end. Notice again in verse 23. It will be done for you.

So this is not, this is not about the display of the power of the words of Jesus' disciples. What Jesus is saying is, if you say this in prayer to God, it will be done for you if you believe.

So when was the last time you heard of, or saw, someone prayed for a mountain to be tossed into the sea, and next thing you know, mountains are flying from the sky and landing in the sea.

Never, right? I mean, I've never had a man, I've never even heard of that happening. So either Jesus is wrong, or Jesus does not literally mean that the mountains are going to be thrown into the sea.

Now, it would be very easy of us, I think, right here to say, well, I mean, Jesus must be talking about our personal mountains in our lives that we need to overcome, and that God will help us to overcome.

[ 13 : 52 ] Kind of like people who look at the story of David and Eli, and they say, well, that's really a story about God helping us to overcome the personal giants in our lives. The only problem is that's not what the story of David and Eli is about, and that's not what Jesus is talking about here.

Remember, Jesus in this context is talking about judgment. The fig tree has symbolized judgment. Now, Jesus has said, in the same way that the fig tree withered when I pronounce judgment, in the same way, you call for the mountains to be thrown into the sea, they will be thrown into the sea, so that this is judgment language.

In fact, you can see that if you turn to your Old Testament to Psalm 46. In Psalm 46, beginning in verse 1, this is what the psalmist says. He says, God is our refuge and strength, the very present out in trouble.

Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way. Now listen. Though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble as at its swelling.

And then glance down to verse 6. He says that the nations rage, the kingdoms totter, he utters his voice, the earth melts, the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress.

[ 15 : 15 ] Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolation on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth, he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the chariots to fire.

Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth. Remember, this is judgment language, and when we hear a statement like that about the mountains being thrown in the sea, we should hear that the same way that we hear statements about the earth melting or the sea foaming as a very vivid description of the judgment of God.

So that, what Jesus is saying is that God is going to bring his judgment, which also means the ultimate salvation of his people into the world in response to and through the prayers of his people. Don't miss that. This is huge. God is going to bring his judgment. He is going to bring in the kingdom and the ultimate salvation of his people through the prayers of his people.

talk about means to and again. Prayers, the very means by which God will usher in the end of the ages. And if that's true, if God will bring his judgment and salvation into the world in a final, ultimate, climactic way through our prayers, how much more so is it true that he will answer all of our other prayers?

[ 16 : 51 ] And that's exactly what Jesus says in Acts 1. If you notice, he says in verse 24, therefore, so, like what I just said about you praying for judgment and God bringing in climactic end times judgment, therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.

Whatever you ask, and that's a pretty broad category, don't you think? He does, though, narrow it down a little bit. He lays a condition to it, doesn't He? He says, whatever, He says, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.

And that's, that's a powerful statement about faith. It's not even believe that you will receive it, He says, believe, have since, believe that you have received it, consider it as good as done, know that God is able to do what it is you're asking Him to do, and fully trust in His ability to do that.

Faith is essential to fruitful prayer. And that is really the main point of this whole passage. Look how Jesus began this discussion. Verse 22, He begins by telling His disciples, have faith in God.

And then He speaks of the one who does not doubt in His heart, but believes that what He says will come to pass. You must believe, you must trust, you must have faith that God is able to do the things that you're asking Him to do, and that He's willing to do those things if your prayer is going to bear any kind of fruit whatsoever.

[ 18 : 31 ] Now, of course, this is not, this is not the only condition laid into effective prayer in the New Testament. It's not the only one. I mean, for instance, Peter, Peter speaks to husbands and says that if husbands do not treat their wives well, they don't respect that, they don't honor their wives, he says that their prayers will be hindered.

James says that it's the prayer of a righteous man that works powerfully, which tells us that wickedness will drain your prayer life of its power.

Or consider Jesus Himself. Jesus says that we have to pray in His name, and then He will, the Father will answer our prayers. In other words, we have to pray acknowledging that Jesus is our mediator, that He's the one who brings our prayers to the Father, and we have to pray in such a

way that His name and fame and glory are the ultimate goal for the thing for which we're asking, but to pray in His name.

Jesus also says that if we want our prayers to be answered that we have to abide in Him, and His word must abide in us. The Apostle John tells us that if we want our prayers to be answered, we have to pray according to God's will.

So there are all sorts of conditions laid out throughout the New Testament for our prayers to be answered. But I think that we can probably tie all of those conditions back to faith, either as evidence of genuine faith or as the substance of genuine faith.

[ 20 : 06 ] so that when Jesus says that you have to believe in order to receive the things that you're asking for, He's assuming all of those other conditions, all of those kinds of things that we just listened to.

He's assuming all of those in faith. In fact, He really only explicitly lays out one other condition in anxious prayer and ties it in with everything He's saying.

Look at verse 25. And whenever you stand praying, forgive you. If you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

Whenever you stand praying, He says. There were lots of prayer postures in ancient Israel. Okay? People would sometimes kneel and often lay the prostrate flat on their face.

But standing was probably the most common sort of prayer posture. So what Jesus is saying is in your normal everyday prayer life, if you want your prayers to be heard, you must be a forgiving person.

[ 21 : 15 ] The consequences for not forgiving are catastrophic. Not only in our prayer life, but in our entire spiritual life.

Notice what Jesus says. that if you do not, God will not forgive you. So that you must forgive others. So that your Father who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

Forgive others so that God might forgive you. So that if you harbor bitterness, if you cling to unforgiveness, it is a poison not only to your prayer life, it is a poison to your spiritual life.

life. Because if you don't forgive others, then Christ will not be your mediator.

And Christ in his role as mediator, he performs two main goals. We'll probably get into the details and say much more. But he does two primary things in his role as a mediator.

[ 22 : 21 ] First of all, he stands in for us in the judgment of God, having taken our sins upon himself on the cross. And he becomes for us a substitute sacrifice in our place, not only receiving the punishment that he deserves, but also in his life of obedience, performing the obedience that's required of us.

So that he absorbs the judgment due to us and he provides for us in God's glory the righteousness that we need in order for us to be able to sin. That's an essential part of his role as mediator.

He is our substitutionary sacrifice, standing in our place in God's glory. But there's more to it than that. Jesus also carries our prayers and intercedes for us to the cross.

Brings them to the cross. So that if Jesus is not your mediator, your prayers should be nothing to bump up against the floor of heaven because they have no one to bring them into God's throne.

They won't bring them into his presence. Listen, here's the thing. If you have really, genuinely trusted in Christ as your Savior and he stands as your mediator, then he has also put his spirit within you who will begin to produce the fruit of love and mercy toward others in your life.

[ 23 : 46 ] So that if you look in your life and there is no love toward others for there is no genuine outflowing of mercy toward others and forgiveness toward others then that is clear evidence that the spirit is not working and the spirit is not working.

That means that Christ is not your mediator and you stand separated from God under his judgment unable to have your prayers answered. So it may very well be that your prayers go unanswered because you do not have a mediator to bring you before the Father.

power and effectiveness of your prayers in the end reveals the vitality of your faith and the fruit of your faith going forth in love and mercy extended to others does the same thing.

It shows that you are vitally connected to your Savior who is your mediator. a part a part of Christ as you will be giving your prayers will go unanswered and you will face all the day.

Touch your heart look to see what is there. Is there this remaining cold hard bitterness that will not leave you? Is there a refusal to forgive other people?

[ 25 : 07 ] Listen I know that a temporary bitterness can sometimes treat them to the hearts and lives as believers. I know that for a time we may harbor unforgiveness towards others but it's temporary it's for a time if the Spirit does not eventually leave you to forgive them that is evidence he's not at work and if he's not at work no mediator no salvation everything is lost.

So it may very well be what God may be saying to you in this passage this morning is that you need to be you need to trust in Jesus so that he can save you from your sins or or it may be that you need to simply examine your own heart and say what bitterness what bitterness am I trying to prevent the Spirit from rooting out in my life and step aside and he will root it out and he will cause you and lead you to say things and do things that you did not believe you were capable of doing this is this is Christianity this is basic this is not complicated out there so do you realize that the vast majority of problems in the marriages of believers is not a failure to do marriage right but a failure to do the

Christian life rightly when we start having trouble parenting our kids or we start having trouble in marriage in our home the first thing that we usually do is we go and we find the best books that we can find on marriage we get the best parenting books so that we can have all the advice at our disposal and fix our problems but usually the problem is not some parenting specific problem or marriage specific problem usually the problem is a failure to live out the fruit of the Christian life in your home it is because you refuse to forgive your spouse for something he or she did it is because you refuse to extend the normal kindness that ought to be the fruit of every Christian in every area of your lives you refuse to extend it to the people closest to you this is not complicated this is basic Christianity does Christ stand as your mediator so that your prayers prove the vitality of your faith or do the lack of answered prayers in your life reveal that you that you lack the fruit of the faith that all do

Christ through