

**EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH**  
**SUNDAY, JUNE 27, 2021**  
**SERMON: PRAYER FOUNDATIONS: OLD TESTAMENT**  
**TEXT: PSALM 5**

An atheist was walking through the woods looking at the beautiful trees and flower that had just bloomed. Because he was an atheist he couldn't thank anyone for the beautiful landscape that he was witnessing. As he was gazing at the sky he saw a bear running toward him, he jumped up and began to run up the hill. Not knowing any better he continued to run up the hill, a bear runs best up a hill because of his strong hind legs, it is better to run down a hill, but any way... The atheist fell to the ground and thought a second and said well I don't believe there is a God but maybe this one time I will call upon His name. The atheist said "God, I need help!" Since I don't believe you exist, I have a request. Will you make this bear a Christian? Just then the wind stopped howling, the creek stopped running and the bear stopped - knelt to the ground and said "Dear Lord, Please bless this food that I am about to eat!"

Prayer...have we lost an understanding of what it is meant to be for the Christian. If we have lost the understanding, we have crippled ourselves of foundation for our faith, belief, and ministry.

It is not unusual to hear, especially during times of personal or national crisis, for people to ask for prayers, or say that they are sending out prayers to someone, and often that is followed up with not only prayers being sent, but also "good vibes and well wishes" being offered in the same breath. Are prayers and good vibes equivalent? What does it mean for prayers to be sent to someone? I have heard many Christians say these things. Do we understand what we are offering? We really should!

As with many aspects of the Christian life, the world has attempted, and succeeded to some extent, to redefine what “prayer” is. If someone does not believe in God but offers prayers to you...what are they offering?

For this sermon, I decided to research what different, non-Christian groups said about prayer and I found an interesting article written by a Harvard graduate who was an “atheist chaplain” at a hospital. This is what she had to say about prayer:

***I never thought I could truly pray, because there’s no one listening. But here, someone is listening. Those words of gratitude and love and hope are heard by those who most need to hear them. Heard by Ernesto, and his family, and by me. Those prayers are powerful, and those prayers were prayed by an atheist. ([An Atheist’s Prayer | Harvard Divinity School](#))***

In her article, prayer became encouraging words that had nothing to do with God, because, after all, there was no one listening. The power of prayer, in her opinion, was solely focused on the person in crisis, hearing words that might calm them or bring them relief.

Do we believe that the experience of prayer is unique. Many religions, even atheists, offer prayer. Why is ours unique? To answer this we begin our journey of understanding at the very beginning. Today we are going to quickly look at prayer in the Old Testament. Again, much of my content has been through the research of Dr. Stan Grenz in his work “Prayer: The Cry for the Kingdom.”

We begin with our scripture lesson which contains a typical prayer in the form of Psalm 5:

## **Psalm 5**

**For the director of music. For pipes. A psalm of David.**

- <sup>1</sup> Listen to my words, LORD,  
consider my lament.**
- <sup>2</sup> Hear my cry for help,  
my King and my God,  
for to you I pray.**
- <sup>3</sup> In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice;  
in the morning I lay my requests before you  
and wait expectantly.**
- <sup>4</sup> For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness;  
with you, evil people are not welcome.**
- <sup>5</sup> The arrogant cannot stand  
in your presence.  
You hate all who do wrong;  
<sup>6</sup> you destroy those who tell lies.  
The bloodthirsty and deceitful  
you, LORD, detest.**
- <sup>7</sup> But I, by your great love,  
can come into your house;  
in reverence I bow down  
toward your holy temple.**
- <sup>8</sup> Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness  
because of my enemies—  
make your way straight before me.**
- <sup>9</sup> Not a word from their mouth can be trusted;  
their heart is filled with malice.  
Their throat is an open grave;  
with their tongues they tell lies.**
- <sup>10</sup> Declare them guilty, O God!  
Let their intrigues be their downfall.  
Banish them for their many sins,  
for they have rebelled against you.**
- <sup>11</sup> But let all who take refuge in you be glad;  
let them ever sing for joy.**

**Spread your protection over them,  
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.**

**<sup>12</sup> Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous;  
you surround them with your favor as with a shield.**

## **CHRISTIAN PRAYER IS UNIQUE**

The act of prayer is not uniquely Christian. Many groups use and advocate prayers. What we are looking at is what makes biblical prayer different!

In Ancient Greece the gods were considered the manipulators of everything in a human's life. There was no aspect of life not controlled by the gods. Prayer was combined with sacrifices and offerings to bribe gods who took great joy in causing havoc and mayhem amongst their creations. They were not particularly moral, and prayer was a way of convincing the gods to side with you and advance your standings within society by granting blessings, treasures, and favours.

As Hellenization advanced and Ancient Greece gave way to the Roman empire, prayer developed in two different directions. Many of the philosophers practiced monotheism, the belief in one god, but the god to whom which they prayed was basically an impersonal god. They were not expecting the god to act or even expected the god to respond or act. For many of the great philosophers did not believe in asking the deity for anything or any type of help, rather they believed the deity was the standard by which humans should evolve to. It was all about self-advancement.

The other path that prayer took during this time was found in what was called the "mystery religious." Myster religions were a type of religious secret society. They emphasized religious experiences and saw prayer as a way of having a vision on the divine. The content of the prayers was unimportant, especially when it came to the hum-drum of everyday life.

## OLD TESTAMENT

We are incredibly influenced to this day by the rise of the Greek and Roman empires and their practices and philosophies. As much as there are similarities between the prayers of Ancient Greece and Roman and examples and teachings in the Old Testament– there is much that is different that we must understand. Dr. Grenz highlighted three features of Old Testament prayer that we should take note of:

**One Faithful God.** The first was the fact that prayers in the Old Testament are to be addressed to only ONE God – Yahweh. The practices and beliefs all around ancient Israel was polytheism – the belief in many gods. Yahweh is the God of the Covenant and that makes Him the God of the community. He had made himself known to his people. It was (and is) this knowledge of the one true God that creates us into a faith community. The community shared a heritage together that was centered around how God had been faithful to His people. This heritage allowed young and old alike to approach Yahweh in prayer knowing that He is faithful and can be trusted. Prayer was based in relationship.

God’s lovingkindness and faithfulness became a foundation for later Christian communities. Prayer was (and should be) a task for the community as they come together. Prayer united the community in worship and fellowship as they were a community that belonged to God through Jesus Christ. Prayer evolved from the Old Testament to the New Testament. The Hebrews were united by the understanding of God’s salvation as seen in the events of the Exodus out of Egypt. This idea of God’s salvation remained the same for the Christian communities, but the God’s salvation focused on the work of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection as a payment for their sin.

For the Hebrew, the question was, ***“How can I know that this active, loving, holy, living sovereign God gives ear to my petitions?”*** And the answered was, ***“If God was faithful and heard the prayers of faithful servants in the past, we know that God will hear and answer our prayers!”***

For the Christian community the question, “*Can I know that God hears my prayers?*” is answered by the apostle John in 1 John 5:14-15:

***<sup>14</sup> And we are confident that he hears us whenever we ask for anything that pleases him. <sup>15</sup> And since we know he hears us when we make our requests, we also know that he will give us what we ask for.***

In a couple weeks we will be looking at the question, “How do we pray according to God’s will.”

**Pray about everything.** In the Old Testament we can see that the faith community believed that prayer covered all areas of life. They did not compartmentalize their lives into secular and sacred, but rather believed that God was interested in every aspect of their daily lives. God was concerned about the ups and downs, victories and trials of the everyday life so going before Yahweh about a daily concern was expected and encouraged. Jesus continued that understanding when he taught the disciples to pray: “***Give us this day our daily bread.***”

Another factor that influenced the prayer life in Ancient Israel was the fact that lived surrounded by their enemies. Prayer for freedom and protection from those who sought to harm them was front and center. Why was this so important? It is because the people were God’s representatives and thus their struggles against their enemies was the cause of God itself! The enemies of Israel were the enemies of God. For the New Testament Church, the struggle against evil was still front and center as Jesus taught them to pray, “***Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.***”

**Worship & Community.** Prayer, in the Old Testament, was a communal activity of the worship life of the community. The community came together in the tabernacle, synagogue, and temple to worship and pray together. When you could not gather at the temple in Jerusalem, the practice was to pray towards Jerusalem. Daniel did this while he was in Babylon. You weren’t praying towards a city, but rather you were praying towards the temple which was the House of

Yahweh. The prayers were directed at Yahweh and Yahweh alone, not to any earthly king or power. This practice and belief continued into the New Testament with a few modifications. The physical temple gave way to the spiritual temple with the formation of the “church” ... the gathered body of believers. With Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit, wherever the body of believers find themselves throughout the world, prayer can be offered to God. Approaching God through the offering of sacrifices accompanied by prayer, gave way to prayer eventually becoming the way a person showed their devotion and faithfulness to God.

With the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, the Jews developed different forms and types of prayers. These prayers would become the foundation of Jesus’ interaction with the pharisees.

## **FOR TODAY**

As much as things change...they stay the same! Prayer is meant to be the foundation of our faith community today. Sadly, many believe that prayer is a “private” matter. It is often not easy to find an individual willing to pray out loud in a worship service. It seems to be a skill that we have lost and needs to be re-learned. Prayer is still the how we approach our faithful, promise keeping, personal God and we are meant to do it together. For those who would say that their faith is a private matter between themselves and God, you couldn’t be further from the truth. The command of Jesus has always been to actively “Go and tell...” James writes:

**<sup>16</sup> Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. (James 5:16)**

We are still encouraged to pray about every aspect of our lives. If we are troubled, have anxiety, or don’t know what to do...we should pray! Paul reminds us in Philippians 4:6-7:

**<sup>6</sup> Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

Many of us know these verses. I guess the better question to ask is ***“Do I actually BELIEVE these verses when the going gets tough?”*** An active, deep, fervent prayer life will guard your heart, your mind, and will give you the power granted by the Holy Spirit to walk through the challenges and struggles of life. If you find yourself immediately saying something like, ***“Well, you just don’t understand the struggles in my life...praying isn’t going solve my problems!”*** This is one of those red flags that jump out to show us that we need a better, deeper understanding of prayer. Prayer is not a “get out of jail free/give me what I want” card. Prayer is a relationship with God that gives us a sure foundation as we face the trials of life...as we “walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”

Finally, it is my goal as your pastor, to help make prayer a more foundational part of our communal worship. If praying out loud scares you, then we will work on that together, slowly, with confidence that the Holy Spirit will give us a boldness to come together, pray together, and worship and have a holy boldness and confidence as we grow in faith and love together!

Next week

Let’s pray...