

We Don't Know How to Pray As We Should
 Romans 8:26-27
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 First Federated Church
 Peoria, Illinois
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The story told of a small Midwestern town where a bar owner began construction on a new pub right next door to a church. The church, not wanting a bar next door, began a drive to stop the construction of the facility. They did so with petitions and prayer meetings. Well, work on the bar continued at an unusually rapid pace right up until one week before the grand opening. It was then, on one stormy night, that lightning struck the building and it was completely destroyed by fire.

The church folk were rather smug about what had happened. They were smug until the bar owner sued the church on the grounds that *they* were ultimately responsible—either directly or indirectly—for what had happened. The church vehemently denied any responsibility for the lightning strike and the two parties ended up in court.

The case eventually went to a bench trial. Each side passionately presented their case. The judge called for a short recess before making a decision. Coming back into the courtroom the judge looked at the two parties and then declared, “I don’t know how I’m going to decide this case because it seems to me that we have a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer and an entire church congregation that doesn’t!”

This month we are looking at prayer. It is a very big subject, one in which hundreds of thousands of books have been written. And our short text this morning is part of a much larger train of thought that we cannot fully explore in the confines of this morning. But, be that as it may, William Barclay once said that Romans 8: 26 and 27 is one of the most important passages in all of the New Testament on the subject of prayer.

I was teaching a high school Sunday School class in Peoria when I first ran across this passage and I found it to be spiritually liberating. For you see, up to that time, I thought that there was a secret to prayer, a formula that one had to discover in order to make prayer “work.” But then I realized, in this passage, that there is no secret, no magic formula to prayer; no right or wrong way to pray.

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought. (Romans 8: 26a)

We do not know how to pray as we ought for essentially two reasons.

In the first place, we do not know what the future holds.

We are blind to Tomorrow. Accordingly, we may pray to be saved from things that are ultimately good for us *or* conversely, we may pray for things that are ultimately bad for us.

Several years ago country singer Garth Brooks touched upon this truth in his country hit song “Unanswered Prayer.”

*Just the other night at a hometown football game, Brooks sang,
 My wife and I ran into my old high school flame
 And as I introduced them the past came back to me
 And I couldn't help but think of the way things used to be
 She was the one that I'd wanted for all times
 And each night I'd spend prayin' that God would make her mine
 And if he'd only grant me this wish I wished back then
 I'd never ask for anything again*

Then he hits the chorus:

*Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
 Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs
 That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care
 Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers*

Thinking back on that night he continued his reflections:

*She wasn't quite the angel that I remembered in my dreams
 And I could tell that time had changed me
 In her eyes too it seemed
 We tried to talk about the old days
 There wasn't much we could recall
 I guess the Lord knows what he's doin' after all
 And as she walked away and I looked at my wife
 And then and there I thanked the good Lord
 For the gifts in my life
 Some of God's greatest gifts are all too often unanswered...*

A second reason why we do not know how to pray as we ought is because, given our temporal world and our temporal understanding, we don't really know what is happening. In other words, as the late Paul Harvey used to say, we do not know “the rest of the story.”

Of all the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah is arguably the one most in touch with the magnitude of God's activity. He once observed that God sees things differently than we do. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than our ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (55: 8,9). The writings of Isaiah greatly influenced our 16th president, Abraham Lincoln.

Elton Trueblood once called Lincoln America's best theologian, and while he never publicly spoke about it, early in his life Lincoln adopted something called “the doctrine of necessity.” Simply stated, the doctrine of necessity says that God is working out eternal purposes in our lives, often in ways that we do not fully understand.

Lincoln came to embrace the doctrine of necessity in response to the unimaginable hardships of his life—the loss of a beloved mother as a child, the death of his first love, the death of two sons—one in Springfield and another when he was president, as well as the weight of American Civil War.

It was the doctrine of necessity that sustained Lincoln in the depths of the Civil War.

In his Second Inaugural Address, which is really a theological document, Lincoln wrote:

“Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. ... Each looked for an easier triumph, ...”

“Both (sides) read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes (God’s) aid against the other. ... The prayers of both could not be answered. ...”

“The Almighty has His own purposes. ...”

“If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses ... (that God) now wills to remove, and that (God) gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe ...?”

“Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Often we are like a child who asks for one thing one day and something else the next. In a book of devotions Ruth Bell Graham once called these prayers “Bicycle Prayers.” She explained what she meant by recalling something that happened when her children were young. One of her sons, Ned, reached the point in his life when he wanted a bicycle more than anything else.

He had been playing with a neighbor boy, Joel Barker, and Ned wanted a bicycle just like Joel’s.

Talking to his father Billy Graham, young Ned described the bicycle in great detail. “I want it TODAY!” he excitedly exclaimed.

“No,” his dad said. “Wait until Christmas.”

And that was that...kind of.

Joel loaned Ned his new bike for a week. Before the week was over, though, Ned knew that Joel’s bike would be too small for him in a few months.

So he decided that he needed a larger, ten-speed model.

The next week he saw a different one advertised in the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. It was a beauty, Ruth Bell Graham remembered with a smile; three speeds, stick shift, spring suspension, butterfly handlebars, triple brakes, slicks—“the works” as Ned told his parents. This is the *bike* that he *had* to have, and you know, it was still two months until Christmas!

Looking back on that time in her family’s life, She wrote: “Then I understood, as never before, why God does not answer all of our prayers right away.” (*It’s My Turn*, pg. 165, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1982)

While we do not know how to pray as we ought, we are *compelled* to pray.
We are compelled to pray for several reasons.

First, our Lord commands us to pray.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples to pray. (Matthew 6:6)

The book of Acts tells us that prayer was and is one of the hallmarks of a healthy Christian community (2:42).

In his letter to a young pastor named Timothy, an elderly Apostle Paul drove home the point when he wrote:

“First of all, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all people, including kings and all those in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.” (I Timothy 2:1-2)

Not only are we commanded to pray but we are “hard-wired” to pray. It’s the way God created us. Eventually we are all driven to our knees in pray, and more often than not, it surrounds us with a peace that passes understanding.

Pastor and author Bill Hybels talked about being driven to his knees at the death of his father.

“Several years ago,” he wrote, “my father, still a relatively young man and extremely active, died of a heart attack. As I drove to my mother’s house in Michigan, I wondered how I would continue to function without the person who believed in me more than anyone else ever has or ever will.”

“That night in bed, I wrestled with God. ‘Why did this happen? How can I put it all together in my mind and in my life? Am I going to recover from losing my father/ if you really love me, how could you do this to me?’”

“Suddenly, in the middle of the night, everything changed. It was as if I had turned a corner and was now facing a new direction. God simply said, ‘I am able. I’m enough for you. Right now you doubt this, but trust me.’”

Reflecting back upon that night, Hybels continued, “That experience may sound unreal, but its results were unmistakable. After that tear-filled, despairing night, I was never again tortured by doubt—either about God’s care for me or about my ability to handle life without Dad. Grief, yes—his death wounded me deeply, and I will always miss him. But it did not set me adrift without anchor or compass. In the middle of the bleakest night I have ever known, one overpoweringly intimate moment with God gave me courage, reassurance and hope.”

Third, God wants a relationship with us because we are God’s children.

When I was in college I use to call my folks every Sunday night, just to check in. I didn’t realize how important those telephone calls were to them until I had adult children of my own. We may not have much to say, but I never tire of talking to them.

God want to hear from us. After all, the Psalmist reminds us that we were created to give God pleasure. (Psalm 149: 4a)

“Pray without ceasing” the Apostle Paul told the Thessalonians Christian community. Make God an everyday part of your life.

One of the oldest Christian spiritual disciplines is something called “breath prayers;” little mini-prayers offered throughout the day.

For years I have used them, especially when making hospital calls or before a meeting of any kind. When I was an on-call hospital chaplain I often got called into the hospital at night. Seldom, if ever, was I called in for a happy occasions in the middle of the night. As I drove to the hospital I would often say a little prayer, “God, I don’t know

what I will be walking into tonight. Help me. Calm my fear. Give me the words that I need.”

Finally, prayer changes things. The great theologian Karl Barth once observed that “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.” Prayer changes things. It changes the way that we look at the world. It changes our perspective. And because we are changed our circumstances and others are changed, too.

Years ago I went to a workshop on congregational vitality and growth. I share it with you in the hopes that it will become a part of your repertoire.

“God, put me in the path of what you are doing in this world. Show me where you are working. Run over me by your presence and guide my path to the Other Side. Amen.”