

Acts 4:23-37

After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant:

"Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth took their stand,
and the rulers have gathered together
against the Lord and against his Messiah."

For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

Watering the Seeds of Prayer

For the past seven weeks we've focused on prayer, and many of us have spend more time than usual in prayer, and I pray that this becomes the new norm among the people in this church, that we devote more of our time in worship but more importantly more time in our busy lives to prayer. Paul writes, "Pray without ceasing," which means that making God such a fixture in your life that you never spend time apart from God. In the book we've been reading, Douglas Steere writes:

"In perpetual prayer, there is something that frames all we do, something that goes on day and night beneath the stream of our consciousness; a gratitude, an adoration, an acknowledgement of creatureliness - of dependence upon God, that we are God's and God made us – a sense of encompassment."

I mentioned that the biggest obstacle to prayer is the mistaken idea that you can exist apart from God, that you can claim authority over your own life, that you can actually own things like cars and boats and houses. Steere writes:

"The mindset that claims to own the universe or a portion thereof can never really pray. We are God's guests in the universe."

The cars and the boats and the houses are things that we make from the resources God provides, including intelligence and creativity, and we should never slip into the mindset that they belong to us. God has provided you these things while you're here, just as God has

provided you with life. And the sooner we acknowledge God as the source of all things the sooner we can truly worship him and give him the reverence he is entitled to.

And when we appreciate God fully, we can enter into sincere prayer: we don't just offer God some obligatory "thank you" for a meal as we thank a stranger for holding a door open for us; we pray from the heart with a profound gratitude for every minute of life. Too often the first sincere prayer that people offer to God are prayers for mercy when their lives are in turmoil. These prayers are sincere because they recognize correctly that God is the only one who can fix the problem. And when God does fix the problem some people are forever changed; they offer bold testimony to God's mercy and love, testimony that they share with their family and their neighbors. But firsthand accounts of God's wonderful deeds soon turn into secondhand accounts, then third-hand accounts. A pattern that you may notice when you read the Old Testament is that God's people face some crisis – usually an enemy invades their country and pillages their villages – the people cry out to God, God intervenes, the people celebrate and tell of God's salvation, and then they forget. And they stop doing what God had told them to do to the point where another crisis occurs, and they cry out to the Lord, the Lord answers, they celebrate, and then forget all about it again. And things have not changed much over three millennia; people forget about God until their lives start falling apart and they cry to him for mercy. We don't have to wait that long; discipline yourself and your family to pray constantly. One thing "the enemy" has done quite well is stigmatize faith in our culture. I never had a friend of mine come to me when I was grieving or hurting and say, "I'll pray for you," or "Would you like to pray about this?" I never told anyone that I would pray for them; it seems to be something we only talk about inside the church, but telling someone you'll pray for them or asking them if they would like to pray with you is the most loving thing you can do in many cases, because you bring that person's situation before a mighty God who can do all things, and you ask God in sincere faith to help your friend, and you do so in Jesus' name which means you do so with the same love and compassion that Jesus has toward us. That is an act of love.

And if you pray with or for someone you may actually prompt that person to pray on their own. And when we live a life that is enveloped in prayer, we reap some benefits. I'm not talking about tangible things – like praying for a better job or a raise or healing enough money to pay your rent; I'm talking of spiritual benefits. Sincere consistent prayer brings what Douglas Steere calls "relentless clarity" to our lives. Some folks stumble through lives in a constant state of anxiety, usually looking for something that brings them joy and peace and contentment, and sadly they think that joy and peace and contentment comes from doing things, and so they are in a constant state of doing things and planning to do things. But the only real joy and peace and contentment in life come from knowing God, and to know God we have to stop being so busy: As God says in Psalm 46, "**Be still and know that I am God.**" We need to stop running around and ground ourselves in God. Our lives are so frantic that we think of being grounded as a bad thing, but actually it's a good thing to be grounded in God.

Along with the clarity that we gain when we live our lives in prayer something else is given to us by God; seeds. That's what Douglas Steere calls them in his book *Dimensions of Prayer*. Seeds are thoughts that God plants in your head when you pray. For those who never pray there is no

opportunity for God to plant those seeds and thus their lives lack true direction and clear purpose. But when you pray, God plants these seeds in your head. I may be praying for someone in church who is facing a health issue, and God plants a seed that says, "Pick up the phone." So I'll pick up the phone. Then what? Well God doesn't want a seed to just remain a seed; he wants it to become a plant, and he wants the plant to bear fruit. As Steers writes, **"Seeds, not fruit, are given in prayer, but they are given for planting."** God wants me to plant that seed and to water it, and so I will call the person that I was just praying for and say, "How are you doing?" That may lead me to pray with that person on the phone OR arrange a time to meet that person and pray together, then to contact other members of the church and get EVERYONE together to pray then to plan a fast with my prayer partners in support of the person whose facing health issues. You see what happens to that seed?

A seed can be more personal: you may be dealing with some sin in your life – laziness or prejudice or some addiction – and the seed may be taking the first step to fixing what's broken in your soul, to improving yourself or seeking help for whatever you're struggling with. God tosses out a seed, and hopes that you plant it, you water it, and you nurture it.

Sometimes that seed is something we're not so crazy about planting. You may have a broken relationship, someone who has hurt or offended you that you just don't want to talk to or forgive or be reconciled with, and God drops that seed that says, "pick up the phone," or "take out a sheep of paper and an envelope." And you decide not to. Very often this is where a prayer ends; God has taken you out of your comfort zone and an alarm goes off. THAT'S IT – I'VE PRAYED LONG ENOUGH. IN JESUS' NAME. AMEN. GOODNIGHT. That's why it's so hard for us to linger in prayer; we're in the presence of the divine; Jesus starts throwing seeds at us, giving hints about what he wants us to do, and we say, NOT NOW, LORD. Quite frankly, I have other things that I'd rather do. There's a funny movie I'd like to watch; there's a leaky faucet I need to fix; there's a test I need to study for; there's a checkbook I need to balance. We can come up with thousands of reasons, some good; some bad, not to plant that seed, and so we may never get around to planting it, and we'll feel our lives can be full and rich and joyful without worrying about that seed.

Besides we know that God will not punish us for not planting seeds; we'll be able to live our lives the way we're living them now, and we're okay with that – you see, those are the thoughts that come us OUTSIDE OF prayer. It's true God is not going to punish you for not watering those seeds, and he's not going to coerce you into doing something you don't want to do. He's not going to force you to have a deeper, more meaningful relationship with him, because that's not the nature of his love. We can exit prayer when it's convenient for us, when we sense that it's getting too intense and that God is getting into our personal space, which points to the painful truth that we haven't truly offered ourselves fully to God – we've only given him what we are comfortable giving him. And so we continue to live with the illusion that our lives are ours to live, that we can remain separate from God.

But if you sincerely want to know God and you want to understand the nature of his love, you come to realize what Blaise Pascal realized nearly 500 years ago, that "Christ will be in agony

even until the end of the world.” God’s desire is for all people to be saved from sin and death, and as long as we continue to hurt one another or hate one another or deprive one another or neglect one another, Christ suffers. Such is the nature of God’s love.

And so Jesus says, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” In order to keep his commandments, you need to love him, and you also need to love one another. In order to love, we need to know what love is, and to do that we need to pray and we need to worship, and we need to discipline our lives engage with God beyond what is simply convenient for us, because God will speak to you, and he will throw seeds to you, and his desire is that you plant those seeds. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.