

It Is Time Now to Pray
Psalm 34:4-6
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
9-8-13

Good morning, once again everyone, and welcome to this great morning in which we have the privilege of gathering together with one another outside. What an important thing it is for us to remember that over there is not church. *This* is church: God's people gathered to sing together, gathered to hear, to Commune and share in the Lord's Table together, and of course to pray together. If you are a guest here with us this morning, I want to once again say, welcome to you, my name is Jonathan, and it is my great privilege each week to speak with you about things that we believe are matters of life changing importance.

This morning, in the very place where you sit, the God who made you, who knows you and what makes you tick, the God who loves you and wants you more than he's currently got you right now. That God wants to shape you, and renew you, and refresh you, and spend time with you, and the way he might deepen that relationship with us is through prayer. Now is the time to pray. Now I know what you're thinking, "Yes, of course, it's the pastor who is telling us to pray, and how could you argue with him?" So why now?

If you are new here with us, I want to tell you that right now, there are a lot of exciting things happening in our community, very good things that will profoundly impact our future together. But these things have caused me to be very anxious lately. Has anyone ever been anxious about something? What I noticed over the last few weeks is that I spent a lot of time walking around, whether it was at home or here at the office or out and about, and I found myself talking out loud to myself, a lot. Has anyone ever done this?

I was so filled with worry that there were times when I would literally hear myself audibly saying things like, "How are you going to do this, Jonathan? This could fall on its face, Jonathan. I hope you know what you're doing." Has anyone ever done something like this? What I realized was happening was that I was praying, but when I shared this with a very wise person, they said, "Perhaps you're talking to the wrong person."

God is at work in our lives, and most definitely God is working in our church and our community. And not just talking with God, but learning to listen – like a deer panting in the desert, panting with thirst for living water – listen to God, pour yourselves out like water on dry ground before God. Then as you learn to be in God's presence and receive the benefits that are unparalleled, be ready to receive the good things from the one who relativizes all the bad things in our lives as he pours out his goodness and his generous love and grace for you. And rejoice together in the presence of the God who loves you each. Friends, family, guests, people, this church, it is time now for us to pray.

You will become the person God envisioned for you even before you were born, the person God created you to be as you learn to be in God's presence in prayer. God's presence and power and provision, God's guidance, mercy, wisdom, and love are

available to us if we will learn to pray. That is why we are launching into a series on prayer. We're not looking at prayer so that we will be more knowledgeable about the subject of prayer; that's not what this is about. We are learning about prayer so that we will pray more, and that we can be more effective and better people of prayer.

But even as I say these things, I want to confess to you that prayer the singular aspect of my walk of faith in which I feel the weakest. Even as I stand here, I feel like I am not qualified to talk to you about prayer because prayer is not a small thing. William McNamara describes prayer this way: "Prayer enters the lion's den, brings us before the holy where it is uncertain whether we will come back alive or sane, for it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God." Maybe some of you feel this way about prayer. Perhaps that's why you're skittish about praying out loud.

That is why over the next few weeks I want us to look at the occasions in the Bible in which people pray. What circumstances in your life cause you to pray? The old saying goes, there are no atheists in foxholes. Everybody, every culture of every age, and every religion has prayer.

This morning in the few minutes we have remaining, I want to just look briefly at three verses from the book of Psalms. This is our faith's richest resource on the subject of prayer. And Psalm 34 is by a man named David. Here he's not actually praying but talking about prayer. Listen with me to the words of Psalm 34:4-6.

I sought the Lord and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him from out of all his troubles.

David is well acquainted with the ups and downs of life. He had a challenging family life growing up, he faced a considerable obstacle for which he was very afraid, David had moral and relational failings, he was jealous, he killed a man. David knew very acutely that life is full of challenges. But David is also the man who wrote words like, "The Lord is my shepherd, and he makes me lie down in grasses and leads me beside still waters."

David, in the midst of all of his challenges, thought to himself when he wrote this, "I want them to know what it is to pray, because I've had the same experiences they have." So he wrote these words.

Verse 4 describes things in David's life that caused him fear. Do you have these things, too? Have you ever felt fear? David's response to the things he fears... "I sought the Lord." Instead of searching for things to bolster him, David sought the Lord.

Verse 5 he says that he has felt shame. Is there ever a time in your life where you've felt shame? One researcher named Brene Brown calls shame one of the most powerful and destructive feelings a person can experience because it causes us to shrivel up and turn inward. David felt shame. The prophet Nathan confronted him after he had slept with another man's wife and said, "You are the man who did this horrible thing." For that,

David felt shame. But here's what he did when he felt shame: David looked to the shining and glorious and loving face of the Lord and he realized that, yes, he made a mistake, but God always has the last word about us, our shame never does.

Then in verse 6, it says that David was in trouble. There were times when he was pursued by other kings, even his own son wanted to bump him off, David had difficulties and troubles, but it says that when this poor man cried, the Lord heard him and saved him from his troubles. Do you have troubles? Do you have shame? Do you have fear? If we are willing to come to God in prayer, God is even more willing to come to us in care when we seek his face.

So I wonder why, and maybe you too, don't I pray more? Did you know that the Ancient Greeks prayed to gods like Zeus? In fact, one of the earliest written works from Greek literature called the *Illiad* was actually written about the same time as David was writing the Psalms. But in Greek prayers, there is a much different approach to prayer. The person doing the praying will say lots of flowery words, use lots of titles to butter up the gods from whom they want something. Then they would list all their merits, and why their request should be answered. Prayer for the ancient Greeks was all about getting my needs met by the gods. Sort of makes them sound like cosmic vending machines right? And the thing about having a relationship with a vending machine is that after a while, things get a little dull.

Is that why we don't pray more? Could it be that much of what we are hoping to get out of prayer is simply our little desires and our little needs met? No wonder we haven't progressed very far.

But what David is showing us in this prayer is that God doesn't just want to give us things, God wants to know us, and better yet for us to know God. Look again at Psalm 34. Three things happen: David seeks (I sought the Lord), David looks (those who look to him are radiant), and David cried (this poor man cried).

When it comes to our prayers to God, the cries of the human heart are enough to reach the ears of the divine. Prayer is not so much an event as it is an ongoing experience. We don't need to use fancy words or flattery or incantations. If you are going through something that you want God to come to you with his presence and help you, just ask. Talk to God, that's all, and I assure you that God will respond—now it may not be audible or a lightning bolt or something like that. But I do promise that God will give you peace, God will give you courage, God will give you perseverance. These are the ways God answers our prayers and it is not dependent upon our merit for God to hear us.

Hear this when I say this to you: **whether or not God hears you has nothing to do with your merit.** The good news of the gospel is that Jesus has merit, and he gives it to us by his presence, his spirit and his work on the cross. No longer do you need to be afraid but you can come boldly to the throne of Grace and share with God what is on your heart and know that God hears prayers. If we will humble ourselves and pray, as it says in 2

Chronicles 7, God will come to us and heal us and our lands, heal our relationships, heal our families, heal our communities.

If you will join me in prayer now, we are going to come before the living and loving God, join in the banquet feast offered to us by our Lord Jesus who with the spirit prays for you. I want to say here and now that if you are a guest with us, this is the supreme gift of the people of God. With these common elements, the Bible says that we are united to our Lord Jesus divinely and mysteriously through faith. And if this is something you are new to, I would invite you to allow the plate to pass by, but as it does, I would invite you to pray – maybe for the first time, maybe it's a reunion prayer – but pray and ask God to come to you, and meet you right where you are and begin that ongoing conversation and loving relationship.

Let us pray. *God, we stand before you now ready to once again begin that walking and talking relationship, not with ourselves, but with you. Life is too complicated, unpredictable, and uncertain for us to face each day alone. But like David, O God, we come to you now because we believe that you are exceedingly strong, generous, and faithful and that you are ready now to hear our prayers. In the strong name of Jesus we pray, amen.*