

What About Prayer • Part 4

The Need For And Power Of Prayer

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Today, We End*

1. This is our 4th and final study on the subject of prayer
2. Of course, there is much more that we could look at
3. We have not even scratched the surface of this great subject that could occupy our attention for many weeks
4. But it was never my purpose to exhaust the subject of prayer - only to get this fellowship to pray more and more effectively
5. I rejoice to see the way the Lord has answered that prayer and look forward to even great evidences of the Spirit's call to prayer in the months to come
6. Our prayer times on Sunday evening have been rich and the afterglows sweet
7. Join us tonight at 6 PM

B. *A Heavy Word*

1. I want to end this series on prayer with a look at the *need for* and the *power of* prayer
2. And as we begin this morning, let me say that what I have to share is a not easy to say
3. Every so often, the preacher must carry a heavy word to the ears of the people - and such is my task today
4. While we start in a hard place, we will move to a place of encouragement before we are finished

II. EZEKIEL 22

A. *Set Up*

1. The prophet Ezekiel lived in the years just before, during and after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians
2. he was carried away captive in the second deportation
3. In chapter 22, God tells Ezekiel to list the sins of Jerusalem and the terrible wrongs the people had committed that demanded their judgment
4. We are not going to read the entire chapter this morning but I want to review the kinds of things that God highlights
5. As I do, see if what God condemned in ancient Jerusalem doesn't sound hauntingly like what is taking place in our modern cities today

B. *The Bloody City*

1. First of all, God calls Jerusalem "the bloody city"
 - a. he calls it this because the value of human life had fallen to such a low

- level, murder was common place
- b. respect, courtesy, and decency had vanished
- c. the cruel and brutal ruled
- d. people killed one another with the slightest provocation
- e. and the law had become so ineffective, people no longer feared being arrested and convicted
- f. do we see a parallel today?
 - 1) indeed we do
 - 2) murders are becoming more & more common place
 - 3) heinous and brutal killings are reported daily
 - 4) and we hear them so often, we are no longer shocked at the news
 - 5) drive-bys - children killed in restrooms - playgrounds hosed down with high powered rifles
 - 6) bodies found in ditches and roadsides and lying in open fields
 - 7) in LA county alone, in 1996, which is the last year for which the statistics are complete, there were 1,400 willful homicides
 - 8) but that's LA right! Large population - a lot of gangs
 - 9) in Ventura county, our nice quiet little bedroom cities, there were 33 murders!
 - 10) in Oxnard alone in 1997 there were 6 homicides and so far this year there have been 7
- 2. Another reason God called Jerusalem "the bloody city" was because parents were offering their infant children as sacrifices to the idols of Molech and Baal
 - a. they did this because they wanted to increase their prosperity and wealth
 - b. and they believed the offering of the fruit of their womb would inspire these idols to bless them
 - c. according to recent polls, 93% of all abortions are performed for purposes of birth control
 - 1) people don't want a baby because it will effect their lifestyle
 - 2) they feel they can't afford it
 - 3) they don't want to be tied down to taking care of a child
 - d. so the blood flows, at the rate of some 1½ million aborted children a year
- 3. Man has not advanced in his sophistication and civilization
- 4. We are as brutal and wicked today as when they offered their children on the molten arms of Molech
- 5. And this is not a sin God will let go unpunished
- 6. Look at verses 4 & 5

{4} "You have become guilty by the blood which you have shed, and have defiled yourself with the idols which you have made. You have caused your days to draw near, and have come to the end of your years; therefore I have made you a reproach to the nations, and a mockery to all countries.

{5} "Those near and those far from you will mock you as infamous and full of tumult.

- a. Israel as a nation had known the wonderful protection and provision of God in the Exodus
- b. the news of what had happened to Egypt and to the nations that opposed Israel's journey spread to all the surrounding peoples

- c. they were in awe of Israel and her God
- d. but now, because Israel had turned from God and gone farther in sin and rebellion than any of them, they had lost not only their glory but their power
- e. they were a laughing stock to the rest of the nations
- f. how sadly familiar this sounds to *our* current state
 - 1) at one time America was the envied nation
 - 2) our prosperity and the blessing of liberty was a beacon that called out to the rest of the world
 - 3) we were known as a solidly *Christian* nation, and the evidences of God's favor were upon us
 - 4) but now the world laughs at us
 - 5) sure they are still envious of our luxury - but it is a luxury that has made us soft
 - 6) and instead of being a people of courage and the home of the brave, we are a weak and whimpering nation of victims
 - 7) we've lost our moral compass and are now known, not for our godliness, but for our godlessness
 - 8) the US is the largest exporter of pornography
 - 9) we have the highest murder rate of all industrial nations
 - 10) the US, which had one of the finest educational systems in the world, now has one of the lowest literacy rates of any modern nation
 - 11) very simply - the nation which at one time led the world with a bright vision of the future has lost it's way
 - 12) and the world mocks us!

C. Corrupt Rulers

- 1. In v. 6 God goes on to decry the corruption of Jerusalem's rulers
- 2. Rather than being the defenders of the rule of law, they were leading the nation in sin

D. Parental Authority Despised / Unkind

- 1. In v. 7 God rebukes them because parental authority was despised
- 2. Parents were not longer honored as mother and father and as those to whom God had given the right and responsibility of raising their children
- 3. I need not go in to the litany of laws and movements which are seeking to loosen parental authority in our nation - you all know about them
- 4. God then confronts them with their lack of hospitality!
 - a. in the ancient world, a people's character was always judged by how hospitable they were
 - b. their whole mortality was determined by how they treated strangers
 - c. the Jews had shut their doors and showed no kindness to the strangers among them
 - d. common respect and civility had all but vanished
 -
 - e. if you doubt this is the case today, stand in line at almost any store

- f. (story of the post office)
- g. visit the Mervyns storewide clearance
- h. traffic at the Mall

E. Profane The Holy

1. God goes on to decry the way they had profaned what was holy
2. Nothing was sacred to them - everything was fair game
 - a. marriage was ridiculed
 - b. the priests became the butt of jokes
 - c. worship was turned into a licentious time of entertainment and pleasure
 - d. it's déjà vu all over again folks!
 - 1) marriage is now being re-defined as two people, regardless of their sex, living together
 - 2) virtually every representation of an evangelical Christian you see on TV or in the movies is a radical, unlettered, uncouth lunatic
 - 3) and in many, many churches, worship has turned from being a reverent adoration of God to a carn-ival; a festival of the flesh!

F. Deceit

1. But then God goes on and speaks to something that sends shivers down my spine for the way it speaks to us today
2. He lays bare the widespread deceit, lewdness and sexual perversion that marked the lives of so many
3. Friends, we live in the midst of a nation of liars!
 - a. I say that with all confidence because it is the only way we can explain how the man who is supposed to be the best among us, the President, can be exposed as a Liar, and yet his approval ratings can be so high
 - b. William Jefferson Clinton is the man for the hour - He well represents our time
 - c. he can lie and get away with it because truth no longer matters
 - d. Clinton is Machiavelli's Prince!
 - e. friends, listen to the words of Jeremiah, a contemporary of Ezekiel's

{Jer 5:27-31} As a cage is full of birds, So their houses are full of deceit. Therefore they have become great and grown rich.

{28} They have grown fat, they are sleek; Yes, they surpass the deeds of the wicked; They do not plead the cause, The cause of the fatherless; Yet they prosper, And the right of the needy they do not defend.

{29} Shall I not punish them for these things?' says the LORD. 'Shall I not avenge Myself on such a nation as this?'

{30} "An astonishing and horrible thing Has been committed in the land:

{31} The prophets prophesy falsely, And the priests rule by their own power; And My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?

4. Think of that - Lies abound, and "My people love to have it so!"
5. The acceptance of deception is not some minor issue
6. The forsaking of truth is not just a petty thing

7. It is a sure sign of the death of a civilization!
8. Thank God that at least in the Church we stand for truth!
 - a. oh if it were only so!
 - b. but it isn't
 - c. 67% of those who call themselves evangelical believers do *not* believe in absolute truth
 - d. truth is *whatever works*, whatever makes them feel good and look successful
 - e. so the watchwords of our time have become
 - 1) "It works for me" - &-
 - 2) "I got no problem with that"

G. The Furnace

1. Because of all these, God tells the people of Jerusalem, He will judge them
2. Like metal is put into a furnace to melt it and consume the dross -
3. He will put them in the furnace of His Holy Wrath

H. Vs. 23-31

{23} And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

{24} "Son of man, say to her: 'You are a land that is not cleansed or rained on in the day of indignation.'

1. Picture a hot, dusty land
 - a. there has been a drought for a long time
 - b. and dry winds have blown and covered everything in a fine layer of grit
 - c. everything is dirty and it's unbearably hot
2. What's needed is a nice downpour of fresh rain to cool the air and cleanse the land
3. But there will be no rain for Jerusalem - there will be no relief from the fierceness and heat of God's wrath
4. The next verses tell why it's too late for mercy . . .

{25} "The conspiracy of her prophets in her midst is like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured people; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in her midst.

5. The religious leaders, the people who should have been at the forefront of resisting evil had forsaken their calling to speak for God, and were instead, speaking for themselves
6. They were using their office for personal gain
7. Instead of saying the hard thing to the people, they had soft-pedaled a more politically correct message
8. All so that they could curry the world's favor & keep their cushy jobs

{26} "Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and unholy, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.

9. The primary duty of the priests was to mediate between God and man

- according to the way God had shown
10. But they had neglected the approved path for their own programs and plans
 11. They had devised more clever and exciting ways to fill their time
 12. And they had neglected the Word of God in favor of a more fashionable message
 13. With the departure of God's word, there was no longer any solid counsel to give to the people, only the errant opinions of man
 14. And once God's Word was removed, it was not long before God Himself was banished from the heart and soul of the nation
 15. With God divorced from the nation, people lost their moral bearing
 - a. good and evil became purely relative
 - b. morality was determined by might
 16. In his classic book, *The Brothers Karamotzov*, Doestoevsky asks the question; "Can man be good without God?"
 - a. the answer comes back as a resounding, "NO!"
 - b. Charles Colson wrote this,

There has never been a case in history in which a society has been able to survive for long without a strong moral code. And there has never been a time when a moral code has not been informed by religious truth. Recovering our moral code - our religious truth - is the only way our society can survive.

{27} "Her princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, to shed blood, to destroy people, and to get dishonest gain.

{28} "Her prophets plastered them with untempered mortar, seeing false visions, and divining lies for them, saying, 'Thus says the Lord GOD,' when the LORD had not spoken.

17. Lies all round!
 - a. lies from the leaders in government
 - b. lies from the very men who were supposed to bear the standard of truth
18. The prophets, the ones whose task it was to diagnose the problems, to point out the cracks in the nation's foundation, were instead covering over those cracks with spackling paste and a little paint
19. Seduced by the world, they had become like Balaam who was greedy for gain and so sold themselves & their message
20. Friends - were are the prophets of God today?
 - a. where are the men and women who have died to the world and dare to take a stand against it
 - b. where are the prophets who are laying bare the corruption and decrying the perversion
 - c. where are they? God send them - We need their uncompromising message

{29} "The people of the land have used oppressions, committed robbery, and mistreated the poor and needy; and they wrongfully oppress the stranger.

21. People will follow their leaders example
22. They are sheep and will follow their shepherds
23. This verse not only describes ancient Jerusalem, it looks an awful lot like this

morning's paper

I. Where Does All This Bring Us?

1. Where does all this bring us?
2. It's a pretty bleak picture
3. Look at v. 30 . . .

{30} "So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one.

{31} "Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads," says the Lord GOD.

4. The final reason why the day of mercy was past and the day of judgment had come was because God found no one to stand before Him and plead for mercy
5. Added to the list of sins against Jerusalem was this: PRAYERLESSNESS!
6. God said,

I sought for a man among them who would make a wall,

- a. this means a wall of righteousness
- b. God was looking for someone who would not compromise with the world and the powers that be
- c. just one who would dare to rise up and say "Enough, No more"
- d. one to say the emperor has no clothes!
- e. someone who would turn around from the winds of fashion and walk the other way
- f. but there was no one
7. He looked for someone who would stand in the gap before Him on behalf of the land, so that He would not destroy it; but He found none
 - a. by standing in the gap, it means taking that place of prayer between God and man
 - b. praying that the Lord would withhold His wrath and instead show mercy
8. But the gap stood empty
 - a. everyone was either too busy or too lazy to pray
 - b. no one cared enough
9. Would it have made a difference if someone had stood in the gap and prayed for the nation?
10. YES!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
11. Look at Exodus 32
 - a. Moses had just spent 40 days on Mt. Sinai with God
 - b. he had received the 10 Commandments and the rest of the law that would govern the nation
 - c. but in Moses' absence, the people grew restless and demanded Aaron make them an idol to worship
 - d. once made, they danced round it and began to pervert themselves

{ 7} And the LORD said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.

{8} "They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They

have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!'"

- {9} And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people!
- {10} "Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation."
- {11} Then Moses pleaded with the LORD his God, and said: "LORD, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?
- {12} "Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, 'He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people.
- {13} "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'"
- {14} So the LORD relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people.

12. Now, this is a troubling passage
- in an earlier study, we said that prayer does not change God's mind
 - yet that is precisely what prayer seems to do here
13. Twice in Amos 7 God begins to pour out judgment on Israel, and both times Amos prays for forgiveness - Both times God relented and stopped the plagues
14. In Genesis we read how God was going down to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their great evil and corruption
- but He stopped along the way and gave Abraham a chance to intervene
 - Abraham got God to agree that if there were 10 righteous citizens in those cities, He would spare them
15. Each time, God looked for and found someone who would stand before Him and plead for mercy
16. You see, Moses and Amos and Abraham did not change God's mind
- as Peter tells us, God is not willing that any should perish
 - His justice demands the punishment of sin
 - but He would rather sinners repent and so escape judgment
 - so He looks for someone to pray and hold back His wrath in favor of mercy so those in sin may come to their senses and repent
17. Jerusalem's great tragedy was this - God looked for someone to stand in the gap and hold back the wrath, and because of laziness - there was no one there!
18. Prayerlessness led to Jerusalem's destruction as surely as murder and perversion

J. The Demise Of Prayer

1. The following appeared in a denominational Newsletter some years ago . . .
We are sorry to announce the passing of Mrs. Prayer Meeting. She died recently at the First Neglected Church on Ho-Hum Avenue. Born many years ago in the midst of a great revival, she was strong and healthy as a child, fed largely on testimony and Bible study she grew into world-wide

prominence and was one of the most influential members of the Church family.

However, in recent years Sister Prayer Meeting has been failing in health, gradually wasting away until rendered helpless by stiffness of the knees, cooling of the heart, lack of spiritual sensitivity and the concern for spiritual things. Her last whispered words were inquiring about the strange absence of her loved ones, now so busy in the market place and places of worldly amusement!

Experts, including Dr. Good Works, Dr. Socializing and Dr. Unconcerned disagree as to the fatal cause of her final illness. They all administered large doses of excuses, even ordered a last minute motivational bypass, all to no avail. A post-mortem examination showed that a deficiency of regular spiritual food, a lack of prayer and Christian fellowship, all contributed to her untimely demise.

2. Humorous perhaps - but sadly so!
3. Dr. Ralph Byron is an outstanding Christian and top-notch surgeon.
 - a. early in his medical profession he sought for a way to make life count.
 - b. professionally and personally, he wanted to be a man of God.
 - c. one day in his search for godliness, he came across Ezekiel 22:30

{30} "So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one.

- d. Dr. Byron pondered this question: "Would God find me standing in the gap?"
- e. he was a young surgeon with the press of responsibility all around him, and he answered the question honestly, "No, not right now."
- f. he concluded that in order for him to be a man of God, he must continually place a priority on prayer.
- g. at first, it was very difficult, because his duties were numerous.
- h. he decided that in order for him to have time with God, he would personally have to get up very early.
- i. he set aside the time of 5:30 a.m., which he called "an unearthly hour." But he did it.
- j. it was the best time, in light of his busy schedule.
- k. week after week he prayed
- l. the remarkable thing he discovered was that within just two weeks, he began to have a quality of life he had never known before.
- m. he saw two men trust Christ.
- n. he discovered that a major conflict in their church had been resolved -- dissolved is a better word -- as he committed it faithfully to God in prayer.
- o. and so he concluded, "It was apparent to me that I must give prayer top priority, even if it means getting less than six hours of sleep every night."

K. The Power Of Prayer

1. I said at the outset of today's message that we would be looking at both the Need for and the Power of Prayer
2. Now, I could go on to give you all kinds of examples of the power of prayer

3. I could use both biblical and historical examples
4. I could tell remarkable stories from the life of Reese Howells for example that would stir everyone here
5. But you know what, I don't need to
6. Look at the Eze 22:30 - friends, here is power!
7. God says that one man - one person can stay the Hand of judgment!
8. If one person can stay judgment - what can two do?
9. What can three or four or 40 do?
10. What if 400 gather and stand in the gap on behalf of the nation?
11. Might we be able to do more than just delay judgment?
12. Might we be able to reverse the tide of evil that has washed over the land like a flood
13. Leviticus 26:3-9 says this . . .

- {3} 'If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them,**
- {4} then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.**
- {5} Your threshing shall last till the time of vintage, and the vintage shall last till the time of sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely.**
- {6} I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid; I will rid the land of evil beasts, and the sword will not go through your land.**
- {7} You will chase your enemies, and they shall fall by the sword before you.**
- {8} Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight; your enemies shall fall by the sword before you.**
- {9} 'For I will look on you favorably and make you fruitful, multiply you and confirm My covenant with you.**

- a. this promise is to Israel
- b. but the principle is the same for God's covenant people today

14. In Jeremiah 18:7-8 we read this . . .

- {7} "The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it,**
- {8} "if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it.**

III. CONCLUSION

A. US Not Israel

1. The US is not Israel, and we would error to equate the two by claiming the promises made to Israel apply to America
2. But note that Moses based his intercession on behalf of Israel on God's glory
 - a. if God wiped Israel out, it would only make the nations laugh at Israel's God
 - b. God's name and glory would be sullied in the eyes of man
 - c. Moses based his prayer for mercy on the exaltation of God's name!
3. The US is known around the world as a Christian nation
 - a. it seems ludicrous to me that at the same time that we are just about

- universally considered to be Christian
- b. forces in our nation are trying to shed that label as fast as they can
 - c. part of the great mockery the world makes of us is that perceive we are Christians but that we export such moral filth
4. Can we not stand in the gap as Moses did and ask that for the Lord's sake, for the glory of His name, He *not* pour out His wrath but instead send revival that would indeed, not make this a Christian nation, but a nation of Christians!

B. God Is Looking Today

1. When a nation turns from the light God sends them, He sends judgment
2. But He would *rather* shower mercy than judgment
3. He would prefer to find His own standing in the gap,
4. God is looking for men and women who will stand in the gap on behalf of THIS nation
5. Does God care about America?
6. Indeed He does - He cares about the sparrows!
7. The question really is - do we care?