

40 DAYS OF PRAYER: THE GREAT PRIVILEGE

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

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TEXT: Hebrews 4:14-16

How good it is to be with you again this Lord's Day! Today I am here preaching, rather than Pastor Greg, whose turn it was to preach. But as many of you know, Pastor Greg had surgery this week on his shoulder. While his full intention had been to stick with the schedule and preach this Sunday, it became increasingly clear that was a not going to be the best idea – so yesterday, I made the decision that I would bring the message for today.

Earlier in the week – I was speaking with Mary Harlan about whether Greg would be able to preach or not. I said that he was still hoping to do that – and that it was appropriate that Greg would be preaching on prayer and remembering who God is – because it would only happen through a lot of prayer and remembering that God is the strongest when you are the weakest!

Well, Greg definitely needed to take care of himself and it was quite appropriate for him *not* to preach today. But I must admit, I felt a bit overwhelmed at getting a sermon together at the last minute. But this sermon was meant for me – because I needed to be reminded of what a mighty God I have, who can help me especially when I am feeling weak! What a privilege it is to go to God in prayer and find that help and hope – right when I need it.

That is the good news we hear in our passage today from Hebrews 4. I encourage you to get your Bibles and follow along with me as I read -- Hebrews 4:14-16. This passage is really one of the greatest invitations and assurances we have – and a passage worth underlining and memorizing. Hear this word of God – as we begin reading in verse 14:

¹⁴ So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. ¹⁵ This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testing we do, yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

To better understand the power and promise of this passage, it helps to know what it means to call Jesus our High Priest.

So let me give you a bit of history, back in the days of the Temple – there were all sorts of courts built, where various people could go to pray: a court for the men, a court for the women and one even for the Gentiles and one for the lepers. At the very the back end of the Temple, there was an inner sanctuary called the “Holy of Holies”. There, behind a very tall, thick curtain, God's glory was said to reside. There, one could think of the throne of God – where Almighty God resides – the Creator of the universe – and King of Kings and Lord of Lords. No one was allowed to go behind the curtain and gain access to the Lord, except the high priest, who went behind the curtain only once a year when he went in to pray for all the sins of the people, on the Day of Atonement.

On the day of the crucifixion of our Lord, right when Jesus took his last breath, that curtain in the Temple was torn down! Jesus – our Most High Priest – tore down that barrier that was between us and God! And now we all can have access to the throne of God! And not just on one day of the year – but every day of the year – and every moment of every day!

Jesus as our High Priest, is now in heaven, sitting at the throne of God, and is interceding for us – praying for us.

And here is what's wonderful – because Jesus came to earth and faced all the same testing that we do – yet without sin – He understands us. He knows what we are going through when we are hurting and when we are grieving. He understands our fears, our doubts, our temptations – and can understand our weaknesses. We can go to Him in prayer and know He truly hears us and knows what we are going through. We don't have a God who sits high above the heavens, on some throne who has no idea what we are going through. We have a God who sympathizes and understands us – and hears our every cry.

Because of what God has done for us in Jesus – giving us access to the throne – we are given an amazing invitation and privilege. We are called to “come boldly to the throne of grace”. We don't have to be afraid but can come freely, with the full assurance that the path to the throne of grace is always open – there is never a guard to bar the way to the throne. There are no set times for prayer or even set words – for the throne is always open and God is always attentive to the words of His children. Whatever lies on our hearts – we can bring it to the throne of grace – a big burden or a small concern – all is heard by God. We are to come and pour out our hearts before Him – for He cares about us. And we don't have to worry about using profound, fancy words – God wants us to just pray from our hearts – simple words that expresses the desires of our hearts. We can come boldly – as a child to a loving Father – and know that God is ready to listen and answer.

What a privilege that is!

And here is what is amazing! When we go to God in prayer what we receive is grace to help in time of need. When we pray – we go to Him empty and we come out with exactly what we need. There is a great exchange that happens when we pray. We go to Him with our needs – and God gives grace to help.

Ron Hutchcraft describes it as the ‘Throne Room Trade-Off’.

As it says in Philippians 4:6-7, ‘Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything present your requests to God, and the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.’ Here's what happens, you go in with worry and you walk out with unexplainable peace. You go in with a situation where you just don't know any answers. You access God's resources through prayer, and you go out with great and mighty things only God could do. What an incredible trade-off. What an incredible exchange. We can go any time, day or night at times when no one else could help us, and receive resources that are beyond anything earth has to offer. This is the great access promise of God. There is no excuse for worry. There is no excuse for fear and with access like this, why do we live in such unnecessary spiritual poverty?

Guess we must not be using the access card we've got – prayer. You need to exchange your burden, your need, for His grace. You need to exchange your worry for His peace. Things that have no earthly answers can be exchanged for things that only God could do”¹.

I discovered the gift of this privilege in prayer when I was a very young child. Some of you may remember this story I have told about when I was around 6 or 7 years old. My grandmother lived with us and I had a difficult relationship with her at times – one where I often felt punished by her for things I did not do. On one occasion, I remember getting in trouble with Grandmother and she was particularly harsh. I ran to my room and cried my heart out in utter despair. I remember kneeling by my bed and crying out to God – pouring out all my hurt and my pain. And I asked God to help me and to calm me down. And all of the sudden I felt an incredible sense of peace come over me. I knew without a doubt that God was right there in the room with me. It was as if He had His hand upon my shoulder – and gratefully, I stopped crying and felt stronger and better able to face the problems with my Grandmother.

I really see that as the beginning of my life of going to the throne room of grace and finding help in time of need. Now – I can't imagine getting through life without that help and guidance – that peace and hope.

And I have seen God work in mighty ways for many people throughout the years who have gathered at the throne of grace – and found peace when praying through depression; comfort when praying in times of grief; direction and wisdom in times of confusion.

And yes – I have even seen the power of prayer when a church decides to earnestly and fervently go to the throne of grace and seek God's direction and guidance. In most recent years, I have seen that happen back several years ago when our church took on the Unbinding the Gospel challenge. We met for some 40 days as an entire church family to prayer and study. We made a commitment to pray earnestly for our church and our mission and vision. I remember there was a great sense of bonding and unity as we met in small groups and prayed together. I also remember someone coming up to me during that season and saying to me that she believed that there was something very spiritually uplifting happening and that she knew there was going to be lots of baptisms at the end of our time of study. And she was right. That year we had 12 baptisms – of both youth and adults. And we were able to get a clear vision about how we were to reach out beyond our walls and “be the church” and reach our neighbors.

I believe that we are in great need of having that season of prayer and focus now as a church family. A time when we intentionally draw near to the throne of grace – and then expect that God will move and fill us anew with His Spirit – His vision and His revival. We need that fresh touch of God's grace – and leading.

Our challenge is for us to continue in our study of prayer – in worship, in our small groups - such as our Adult Sunday School Class that meets at 11am – and on Wednesdays, at 9am and 5pm, here at the church. And at each of those gatherings, to draw near to the throne of grace – and seek God's face and God's leading.

And then I am challenging you at home to make a commitment to praying daily. Draw near to the throne of grace – and expect God to act! Each and every day – ask God three things: to revive your heart – to revive your church family – and to revive our community.

May it be that the Spirit will move in a mighty way and renew our hearts and minds – so that we can grow as Spirit – filled, committed disciples of Christ.

Let's Pray

Invitation

Resources:

¹Ron Hutchcraft, "Prayer - Accessing All Heaven Has - #7411. www.hutchcraft.com/a-word-with-you/your-personal-power/prayer-accessing-all-heaven-has-7411