

Prayer and Much Incense

This morning is a little different in that we are going to talk from Revelation 8 about prayer but also tie that message into some significant developments in our church for which we should be thankful and prayerful. Prayer is what I spoke about last Sunday at GraceLife church in Deltona and on Wednesday at a church planting conference in Orlando. I shared at both places that I have a bronze plaque in my office that one of our members (Nicky Merthe) gave me when we built this building and began to worship here. It is inscribed with the words: *"Because you prayed"*. Those words come from **Isaiah 37:21**. The Jewish king Hezekiah, confronted with the overwhelming power of the Assyrian army under Sennacherib, receives a letter demanding he admit defeat. Instead, Scripture says, he spread the letter before the LORD and he prayed to the LORD. It was then the prophet Isaiah sent Hezekiah a word from the LORD. It was the promise that the enemy would be defeated. It began with the words: *"Because you have prayed"*. God says, *"I'm going to do something for you that is going to save you and bless you and I am going to do it 'because you prayed'"*.

Early in our history as a church I preached a message in which I told that story and called our people to pray for God to enable us to buy land, build a building so that we could grow our ministry. At the time we had many months in which expenses exceeding our giving so that seemed huge and out of our reach humanly but all of that happened! We met our expenses, increased our giving to missions, bought land, built our building and grew our church family. When the building was finished Nicky gave me that plaque, *"Because you prayed"*. For me that plaque is a reminder that while God is sovereign, he has chosen to work *through* our prayers.

There is a principle that is taught throughout the Scriptures. It is this:

I. PRAYER IS THE HUMAN INSTRUMENT THROUGH WHICH GOD'S PEOPLE POWERFULLY PARTICIPATE IN GOD'S PURPOSES.

This is pictured in **Revelation 8:1-5**. A scroll that contains God's plan of judgment and redemption was sealed with seven seals and as the last seal is broken and the scroll opened something remarkable happens. There is silence in heaven. An angel brings the prayers of God's people and offers them before the throne of God.

A. Prayer interrupts heaven and brings God's response.

Usually we like to think of events on earth being interrupted because of the actions taken in heaven. However, here it is the other way around. All of heaven comes to a standstill. *Why? Because all the saints are praying and God is listening. Verses 4-5, ... and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. 5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.* The storm of judgment that falls on the earth is God's response to the prayers of His people. The whole scene is very symbolic but it is beautiful and it is also very practical. It's not just about judgment, it's about prayer. Prayer interrupts heaven and brings God's response.

B. Prayer is a weapon for spiritual battles.

In **Revelation 7** we saw that God seals his servants, shapes his sealed servants into a holy army and assures them of total victory. Last week Curtis showed us that one of the weapons with which the soldiers of God fight their spiritual battles is their willingness to suffer for Christ. Here's another weapon: prayer. The first Christians felt poor and powerless confronted with the brutal force of Rome and the surrounding culture of deep-rooted paganism. God was telling them that they were not powerless. The Bible's teaching on prayer leads overwhelmingly to one conclusion. Prayer changes things.

Last week I read the story of Sojourner Truth. Sojourner Truth was a former slave who became a strong Christian and a hero in the fight against slavery. She went around speaking and led many people to Christ and she knew she had no resources in the world eyes but she believed in the power of prayer. At one time her five-year-old boy was sold illegally, she had no means to deal with this but she went to God. In her autobiography she records this prayer: *"O God you know how I am distressed because I have told you time and again, now God, help me get my son. If you were in trouble as I am and I could help you, as you can me, think I wouldn't do it? Yes, God you know I would do it."* She ended up being the first black woman to win a lawsuit against a white man. She got her son back. She embodied what Jesus taught. In **Luke 11:9** Jesus said: *And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. This is what is pictured here in John's vision.*

Prayer is the human instrument through which God's people powerfully participate in God's purposes. But it is more than that...

II. PRAYER IS LIKE PLEASING INCENSE OFFERED TO GOD. IT IS PLEASING TO GOD WHEN WE PRAY TO HIM.

Revelation 8 is not the only place where incense is connected with prayer. **Revelation 5:8** *And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.* When incense is used as a symbol of prayer, what the symbol says is that prayer is not only powerful it is pleasing. **Psalms 141:2** says, *Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!*

A. It's all grace that our prayers are like incense but they are.

This truth that your prayer can be pleasing to God like incense is related to the truth that there is a new identity you are given by God when you become a Christian. In both **Revelation 5** and **8** the incense is connected to the prayers of the saints. The saints! In the Bible that doesn't mean a few special Christians. But all true Christians. The Bible says we are all by nature sinful and therefore sinners. It may sound old school but you can't be right with God until you admit it. We all deserve God's judgment. The good news is Jesus fully took the judgment we deserve for us when he gave himself as a sacrifice on the cross. That's why he is the Savior. He saves us by his sacrifice. On the cross Jesus said: "It is finished!" Imagine yourself saying to him, "I'm afraid in my case it isn't, I need to do something more to complete the job and win God's love." That's foolish. There is only one thing you can do: turn to him and trust in him. The moment you trust the one who died and rose to be your Savior as your Savior you are set apart for God and that's what it means to be a saint and that's what makes your prayers incense. If Jesus is your Savior you were a sinner but now you are a saint and your prayers, are like incense that pleases God.

B. If Prayer is powerful and pleasing we need to keep praying!

Jesus prayed, and taught on prayer and made promises about prayer but he only told two stories or parables about prayer. In both of them the point that he makes is that we should pray persistently. In **Luke 11** he tells the story of a man who pounds on his neighbor's door at midnight to get bread for his guest. The neighbor finally gets up to give

it and he says, *ask, seek, and knock*, keep praying and pray boldly like that. In **Luke 18** he tells the story of a widow who bothers an unjust judge until he finally gives her what she wants. Luke says Jesus told that story to teach us we, *“ought always to pray and not lose heart”*. In both those stories the person gets what they need because they won't stop bothering the person they are asking but we miss the point if we think God is bothered by our prayers. Jesus says the point he is making is based on a dramatic contrast - if sinful, sleepy people will respond to persistent requests how much more will a loving God and Father respond to his children when they offer their prayers? Jesus tells those stories to teach us to keep asking because God loves it when we keep asking. Our bold, persistent prayers are like incense to God. So pray boldly and keep asking with confidence.

There is a great picture of bold persistence in the movie *Out of Africa*, Meryl Streep plays baroness Karen Blixen. She has a coffee plantation in Kenya and falls in love with the Kikuyu tribe that lives on the land. She loses her plantation and the new owner is going to kick the Kikuyu off. So she does everything she can to help them find them land. No one will help her. But there is a new British governor of Kenya being welcomed at a formal event. She is a baroness so she is invited. Hundreds of people are there all dressed up and in the reception line. When she gets to the governor she asks him: *“Will you help me Sir Joseph?”* Another official says, *“Baroness, this is really not the time.”* And she takes her dress in her hands and goes *down on her knees*. *People are looking, telling her to get up. She says: “You are a powerful man and I have no one else to turn to.”* He says, *“Let's discuss this in the proper way.”* She says: *“You mustn't be embarrassed. I've lost everything. It costs me very little to beg you.... They have no where else to go.”* He says: *“I'll look into it. We'll do the best we can.”* She takes his hand and looks him in the eye and asks: *“May I have your word?”* He seems to try to pull his hand away and is silent.” Then the governor's wife steps up and says: *“You have mine.”* She is successful and the Kikuyu get land and a place to live! That is a small picture of the shameless boldness of persistent prayer. People in power may be irritated and bothered by that kind of persistence but God isn't. He loves it. He invites it. He pictures it as incense. That kind of prayer tests our faith, and demonstrates our faith and purifies our faith and it pleases God.

I've shared with you in the past the simple spiritual discipline of keeping a prayer journal or just a prayer list. Draw a line down the

middle on top right, write "*I ask*", record your prayer and date it. On the left write "*he answers*". Then get serious about prayer.

This morning as part of this message and our worship I want us to give thanks for prayers that God has answered and identify some key things for which we need to be praying now.

1. Our building. Remember how I started out talking about that? I want to officially announce that as of the first of this month this place, land, building all of it is paid in full. So, let us acknowledge the faithfulness and generosity of our people over the years and also our gracious God who has richly provided for us.

2. Our church planting with Redeemer City Church. I spoke with Casey Johnson again this week. Casey and Nate and the people of Redeemer City Church in Madison, Wisconsin thank you and thank God for his provision. We were committed as a church to a certain level of support for them as our church plant and they have assured us that it is time for them to come off of our support. We have completed our second successful church plant in Redeemer City Church. We give thanks as we continue to pray for them.

Now, I'm happy to be able to announce another church plant.

3. GraceLife Deltona is now our next church-planting project. I preached for them last weekend. Several of our members and elders went with us to worship with them. They already have around 100 people coming. They meet at Deltona High School. They have a church planting team of two pastors. Their lead pastor is Tommy Clayton and their executive pastor is Jeff Eckert. A little over a year ago they were looking for a like-minded church to help them with church planting. They found us and asked us for input and mentoring. We had them assessed, sent them to get some training, and we have been working with them and mentoring them but not "officially partnering" with them for the last year. Last month I proposed to our elders that we formally take them on as our next church-planting project and they approved. Next week at the Race Day picnic Tommy will be with us to share briefly as part of our celebration. We will be telling you some of the ways we, and you, might work with and support them. We are thankful God has given us a third church-plant.

4. Another young man came to us last year to talk about church planting. Byron and Kim Cogdell are from Daytona. Byron graduated from Bethune Cookman. They are presently doing a two-year residency program for church planters at a sister church in the Acts29

network called Fellowship Memphis in Memphis, Tennessee. Their hope and prayer is to come back to Daytona Beach in the summer of 2017 and they would love to have our help, to plant another strong sister church in mid-town Daytona. Byron is flying in tomorrow, meeting with our elders and attending an Acts29 cohort meeting I lead on Wednesday. So at this point with the Cogdells we are exploring the exciting possibility that as GraceLife gets established they can be part of our next church-planting project.

In 2008 we talked about the goal of planting a church every three or four years. Now we've planted two churches, we're planting a third and we're looking at the possibility that by 2018 we may have planted or been instrumental in the planting of four daughter churches! That's wonderful. We have cause for thanksgiving and need for prayer.

Conclusion

Now, before we conclude this part of our worship think about your life on a personal level. What are you praying about in your life right now? What do you need to be praying about? Let's take a few minutes to think and thank and pray about these things together.

Let's pray together now. As we pray, allow me to direct you into prayer.

1. First take a moment to think about your life. What do you think or worry about the most? Jesus said, ask, seek, and knock. Revelation says our prayers are like incense and result in God acting for his kingdom purposes in our world. Take your concerns, connect them to the kingdom of God, relate them to Him and lift them in prayer. *Prayer*

2. Now, take some time to pray for our future. Just as you pray about your life and concerns pray for our church family and future ministry. Pray specifically for our church-planting. New churches reach new people and different churches reach different people. Pray for these church planters and core groups in Deltona and Daytona and that God would clearly lead us and provide for us as we follow him. *Prayer.*

3. Finally, let's give thanks together. Give thanks for the grace God has shown you and the good things he has done for you. Then give thanks for what God has done for us and through us as a church. Thank God

that we have paid off this building, we have planted churches and are growing together. *Prayer*

Amen.