

## *What is Prayer?*

Third Sunday after Epiphany – January 25, 2004

Sermon Background Study

*Scripture Passages (NRSV)*

*Jonah 2:1-3, 7-10*

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,<sup>2</sup> saying,

“I called to the LORD out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

<sup>3</sup>You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.

<sup>7</sup>As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

<sup>8</sup>Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.

<sup>9</sup>But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.

Deliverance belongs to the LORD!”

<sup>10</sup>Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

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*Isaiah 58:6-9*

<sup>6</sup>Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

<sup>8</sup>Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

<sup>9</sup>Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

*We continue our six-week series on prayer: A Life of Prayer. Why do we pray? What is prayer? Does God answer our prayers? We'll consider these questions and more as we seek to make prayer a priority in our living.*

*Sometimes prayer comes easily*

Jonah lies in the belly of a “great fish.” After three days and three nights, he prays. What could be more natural? Even those who find prayer challenging would find it easy to pray in Jonah’s circumstances. Jonah says to God, “In trouble, deep trouble, I prayed to God. He answered me. From the belly of the grave I cried ‘Help!’ You heard my cry.”<sup>1</sup> Jonah’s prayer is simple and direct.

### John Wesley A Prayer of Submission

I found this prayer in a volume of the *Upper Room Spiritual Classics*. The prayer is from a collection published by Wesley in 1733, before his mission in Georgia. I’ve abridged the prayer and updated its language a little.

To you, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, my Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, I give up myself entirely. May I no longer serve myself, but you, all the days of my life.

I give you my understanding. May it be my only care to know you, your perfections, your works, and your will.

I give you my will. May I have no will of my own. Whatsoever you will, may I will, and that only. May I will your glory in all things, as you do, and make that my end in everything. May I ever say with the Psalmist, “*Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.*” May I delight to do your will, O God, and rejoice to accept it. Whatever threatens me, let me say, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.” And whatever befalls me, let me give thanks, since it is your will.

I give you my affections. Dispose of them all. Be my love, my fear, my joy; and may nothing have any share in them . . . What you love, may I love; what you hate, may I hate . . .

(continued in the text page on page 2)

<sup>1</sup>This rendering of v.2 is from Peterson’s *The Message*. “Sheol” (v. 2 in the NRSV) is the home of the dead.

Jonah had run away from God with about as much determination as a person could muster. When God commanded him to go and preach to the city of Nineveh,<sup>2</sup> Jonah headed out to sea instead. When a terrible storm came, Jonah was willing to be tossed into the sea rather than call on God. Jonah didn't even turn to God when he was first swallowed up by the fish! But, in the end, after three days and nights, Jonah prayed and God answered.

*What is prayer?*

We pray when we plead to God for help in times of need. We pray when we thank God for all we have and enjoy. We pray when we praise God. We pray when we reveal to God our concerns for others. We pray when we pause to reflect upon the deep love that God has for us all. We pray when we offer our own love to God. In his book, *Prayer*, Richard Foster writes about 21 forms of prayer. But even Foster does not exhaust prayer's meaning. Prayer is all this and more.

It is very easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that prayer consists only of the words spoken to God. But Paul can urge the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" because he knows that prayer is not a paragraph but a life. When we live with God at the center of all we do, when we live in oneness with Jesus Christ, we are living a life of prayer, a life of constant conversation with God. Sometimes this conversation is spoken aloud (at least on our end!). Sometimes this conversation is spoken in silence. And sometimes this conversation is only felt. Indeed, there are times when God

#### Wesley's prayer continued

I give you my body. May I glorify you in it, and preserve it holy, fit for you, O God, to dwell in. May I neither indulge it, nor use too much rigor toward it; but keep it, so far as I am able, healthy, vigorous, and active, and fit to do you all manner of service.

I give you all my worldly goods. May I prize them and use them only for you. May I faithfully restore to you, in the poor, all that you have entrusted to me, above the necessities of life. May I be content to part with them too, whenever you may require.

I give you my reputation. May I never value it, but only in respect of you; nor endeavor to maintain it, but only as it may serve and advance your honor in the world.

I give you myself and my all. Let me look upon myself to be nothing, and to have nothing, apart from you. Be my sole governor; be my portion and my all.

O my God and my all, whenever I am tempted to break this solemn promise, when I am pressed to conform to the world and to the people and customs that surround me, may my answer be: "I am not my own. I am not for myself, not for the world, but for my God. I will give God the things that are God's. God be merciful to me a sinner."

carries us in this conversation. Paul wrote this to the Christians in Rome: "And the Holy Spirit helps us in our distress. For we don't even know what we should pray for, nor how we should pray. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will" (Romans 8:26-27, NLT).

*A reminder from Isaiah*

Prayer is God's gift to each of us and to our community. Alone and together, we are to turn to God in every moment and circumstance of our lives. But today's passage from Isaiah is a cautionary one. In the prophet's community, the people are busy fasting and praying, carefully observing all the ceremonies and ritual of their religion. But they ignore the manifest injustice that surrounds them. They do not share their bread with the hungry nor do they bring the homeless into their house. They seek God but ignore their neighbor - and all they hear from God is silence!

It would be a mistake to conclude from this passage that God only hears the prayers of the "good" people. The problem isn't with what God can hear but what we can hear. Hearts that are committed to loving God and loving neighbor, to caring and serving . . . such hearts are tuned to hear the conversation with God, to hear that "still, small voice" for which we all long. As in all things Christian, powerful, life-changing prayer involves our whole self - our heart, our head, and our hands. As we seek to find our heart's true home, we must no less seek to be the light to the world, breaking forth like the dawn, praying and working for all the world to see.

<sup>2</sup>Nineveh was the great imperial city of the hated Assyrian empire.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(A selection of prayers from the Old and New Testaments)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1</b> 1 Chronicles 29 In his last speech, King David appeals to the people for money to build the temple and offers a prayer of praise.</p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> 1 Kings 8:22-53 Solomon's prayer of dedication for the temple</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> Nehemiah 1 Nehemiah prays for help as he asks the King of Persia that he be allowed to begin the rebuilding of Jerusalem.</p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> Matthew 26:36-44 Jesus prays in Gethsemane on the eve of his death.</p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> Ephesians 3:14-21 Another of Paul's prayers for the Ephesians</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### February Book Recommendation: *Prayer* by Richard Foster

Richard Foster's book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, has been one of the most popular books on prayer since it was published in 1992. I doubt you could find a contemporary book that will be more helpful as you seek a richer and more enduring prayer life. Note though, my recommendation comes with a caution. Foster's book is so rich that I urge you to avoid trying to consume it all at one time. Instead, consider reading one chapter every couple of weeks or so. Foster himself notes that "Some people work at the business of praying with such intensity that they get spiritual indigestion." Take your time with this book. Use it as a guide over many months. It will repay a slow, thoughtful, and prayerful reading.

Available in the St. Andrew Bookstore

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In his *Workbook of Living Prayer*, Maxie Dunnam writes about the "Jesus Prayer." This is a very simple, one-sentence prayer that Christians have prayed for centuries. Indeed, read the last line of Wesley's prayer of submission in the page two text box. The prayer goes like this:

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

Take a few minutes, center yourself on this simple prayer and silently repeat it to yourself several times. Then say it aloud, slowly and thoughtfully, at least five times. If you are part of a group, have someone lead the group in saying this prayer aloud in unison.

After you've spent some time simply saying the prayer, reflect on it and talk about its meaning to you. What is it about this prayer that would have given it such endurance in the Christian community? What is the value in learning and praying prayers like this one, prayers that have been written and used by others?

2. Richard Foster builds his book around 21 forms of prayer. There is no magic to this number; other authors would come up with varying ways to organize and think about the different forms of prayer. Make a list of your own. How would you go about categorizing and talking about the forms of prayer? For example, one form might be a prayer of thanks. Another would be a prayer of praise. What are some others? (You might have to push yourself on this!)