

“Prayer: does it make a difference?”

Text: Revelation 5:6-8; 8:1-5

- Delivered at Central Baptist Church on Sept 2, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Our big green canoe jolted to the side almost spilling the whole family into the water. My two brothers and I braced ourselves in the middle of the boat. My parents started yelling out instructions. One moment all was calm. The next moment it was chaos and it was all because of the fish.
 - This is my big fish story. I was about 8 years old and our family was camping at Windermere Lake in the B.C. Rockies. It was a nice calm day on the water and so we decided to go for a short canoe ride. I pleaded with my dad to allow me to take the fishing rod along.
- Now looking back I see that my dad was humouring me that day. You see he let me bring the rod but he never told me that a fish-hook needs bait. So, there I was dragging an empty hook along in the water with nothing attached to it but a lure.
 - As we headed out into the water my hook snagged on the weeds a few times. And then not more than 10 minutes into the canoe ride the rod suddenly bent like a bad shaped banana.
- Since my dad was only humouring me, he also failed to bring a net to scoop the fish with and something to hit it with. That is why everything in the green canoe was chaos when that fish surfaced.
 - With the boat rocking perilously my mom took a beach towel, put it in the water, and wrapped it around the thrashing fish. Pulling it into the boat, my dad awkwardly clubbed the thing with his canoe paddle.
 - And there it was – a beautiful rainbow trout that was 3 feet long...alright, it was only a foot long but this is my big fish story.
- Now that is fishing I enjoy. Just throw out your line and in no time at all, with no waiting, and no effort, a fish begins yanking on the line. But my fishing days have never been like that again. When I moved to Calgary my friend Kevin and I used to ride our bikes 10km to a man-made fishing hole. I will tell you one thing it was more man than fish. We would sit waiting for hours. Most days we would wait all day with no fish. We caught maybe 3 fish over 4 years.
 - Eventually the waiting outweighed the thrill of a catch and we simply gave up fishing.
- Fishing is a great metaphor for prayer. At times we pray and we see immediate results. You know the stories. Someone needs \$85.61 to make rent. They pray and the next day a stranger gives them a cheque for exactly that amount.
 - That is how we want prayer to be. We want prayer to be like catching my first fish – just drop the line and presto, things happen. But prayer is so much more like waiting is it not? We pray and ask God to act...then we wait. We pray again and again...still waiting for God to do something. The rod stays straight, the illness still prevails, the job search is fruitless, family members still resist Christ, injustice still occurs on the earth, the desire for marriage is there but God has not yet provided even a potential marriage partner.
 - For many Christians the waiting turns into disappointment, then into disillusionment, and finally they just give up praying. Prayer, like fishing, is about waiting.
- Where are you at with prayer? Have you prayed for something or someone for many years but eventually given up because nothing happened? Have you grown frustrated with God because you have prayed with tears and an aching heart and the rod is still straight? Have you abandoned praying to God almost altogether because all the waiting has left you disillusioned?

- This message is for you. This morning I want to help you to persevere in prayer by showing you how God uses prayer to shape history. I will form this morning's message around the following question: **(SHOW SLIDE 2) How do we persevere in prayer when there is more waiting than action?**
 - Our passage today gives us three answers to that question.

GOD DELIGHTS TO RECEIVE OUR REQUESTS

- Answer #1: **(SHOW SLIDE 3) Persevere in prayer because God delights to receive our requests.** Revelation 4-5 is a magnificent vision of the throne room of heaven. In chapter 5 a scroll is brought before the throne of God. It is the scroll of history. It contains the meaning of history, of world history, of your history, of my history and our children's history.
 - History is not accidental. History is the unfolding of the plan of the sovereign God. Nothing catches God by surprise. He has planned it all out and the contents of that plan are on this scroll. But the scroll is sealed shut. No one is found who is worthy to open it and set God's plan in motion.
 - But then one who is worthy is found - Jesus the Lamb of God is worthy to open the scroll. He is worthy because he was slain. And right in the middle of the chapter is a picture of prayer. **READ 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.***
- Do you see the image that is being presented here of prayer? It is that of incense. The 24 elders all have golden bowls full of incense, full of sweet smelling perfume, and this perfume is said to represent the prayers of all the saints. Just to ensure we understand this verse, let's ask three quick questions of it.
 - First, who are the saints? They are not saints in the Roman Catholic sense of a few special individuals who lived extraordinary lives, have been elected to sainthood after death, and are to be venerated by all people. These are not the prayers of St. Christopher or St. Joseph.
 - In the Bible all Christians are saints. We are saints or holy ones, only because we are in Jesus Christ. So this verse is not referring to some great people's prayers, it is referring to anyone's prayers who are in Jesus, who trust in him alone for salvation.
 - Second, what is this bowl of incense? It was a shallow bowl in which sweet smelling spices were burned. During the days of the Temple it would be offered to God. When the time came the people would withdraw from the inner court of the temple. They would fall down before the Lord and spread out their hands in silent prayer. As they did this, the priest would take the bowl of burning incense into the sanctuary and he would set it on the alter. The sweet smelling smoke would rise up, symbolically showing that the prayers of the people were ascending to God as a sweet smelling aroma.
 - That is why David writes in Psalm 142:2 ***"May my prayer be set before you like incense."***
 - Third, what kind of prayers are these? We can see the answer in chapter 6. Look over at chapter 6:9-11. **READ 9-11 - *⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" ¹¹Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.***
 - Notice that these prayers are not the praises of God's people. They are requests. More specifically they are requests of those who have suffered for the sake of Christ.

They are requests for vindication. They are asking God to judge the world, to make the wrong things right, to bring justice on the earth. We know those kind of prayers don't we? These are all requests that God's kingdom would come – that God would reign, that sin and its effects would be abolished, and shalom, God's peace, would reign.

- So this should be a very comforting picture to you. You should persevere in prayer because God delights to receive your requests. Your prayers are like a sweet smell to him. When you pray God does not plug his nose and turn away in disgust from your requests. They are sweet smelling incense. Your requests are acceptable in the very throne room of heaven. He delights to receive them. What a comforting picture.
 - So that is the first point: persevere in prayer because God delights to receive our requests.
- But this picture of our prayers being sweet smelling perfume to God is also a little disturbing. Author Mark Buchanan, whom I have borrowed a few thoughts from today, expresses it well.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 4) “It too easily conjures before me...my greatest fear about prayer: That is mere smoke and scent...[that] can do no more to heal a broken world than a splash of aftershave can do to revive a corpse...I pray to move God’s hand. I pray to watch those hands bend and break things, make and shape things, remove things, implant things. I don’t pray to make some otherworldly fragrance. Mothers are dying here, Lord. Children are starving. Death breeds, destruction stalks, evil gloats. There is trouble everywhere. We are praying fervently, feverishly for you to do something about it. Don’t just smell our prayers – answer them.”¹**
 - Although it is comforting that God delights to hear our prayers, what we really want is for him to act. And yet so often we are left waiting. Here is where we need the second answer to our question. So how do we persevere in prayer when there is more waiting than action?

IN HIS TIME, GOD WILL USE OUR PRAYERS TO CHANGE HISTORY

- Answer #2 **(SHOW SLIDE 5) Persevere in prayer because in His own time God will use our prayers to change history.** In chapter 7 the seals of history begin to be opened but before the final seal is opened, something happens in the throne room.
 - **READ 1-5 - When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ²Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. ³And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, ⁴and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. ⁵Then 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.**
 - I want you to see two things here.
- First, the waiting is over. There is action is now. The angel hurls the censer to the earth. It is like a bomb that explodes on the earth bringing forth thunder, lightning and an earthquake.
 - For the whole next chapter history is unfolded. The waiting is now over and God is acting.
- Second, in some mysterious way it is our prayers that move God to act. Where do I get that? Let me ask you, **“what is the point of verses 3-4? Would it not make sense simply to read 2 about the angels being given the trumpets and then 5 about the action on earth? Why are verses 3-4 inserted here?”**

¹ Mark Buchanan, *Your God is Too Safe*, 223.

- Do you see it? The judgement of God upon the earth is directly linked to our prayers going up before him. The prayers are offered, then the fire falls. In some mysterious way, the prayers of the saints are part of that process of bringing the kingdom of God to the earth.
 - G. Beasley-Murray helps us here: ***“The significance of this picture can hardly be overestimated. No one was more aware than John of the limitations to what individual men and women can do to change the course of history and to bring in the kingdom of heaven...But we can pray to him who has almighty power, and it would seem that God has willed that the prayer of his people should be part of the process by which the kingdom comes. The interaction between the sovereignty of God and the prayers of the saints is part of the ultimate mystery of existence. Faith is called on to take both seriously.”***²
- The Bible teaches both that God will cause all of history to come to pass and that one of the means he uses to do this is the prayers of his people.
- So do you see this picture now? At some point in time that is not up to our choosing God decides that the prayers should not remain in the golden bowls. The time of waiting is over. All the prayers that we have sent heavenward are mixed with fire and hurled back to the earth. This is profound. Listen to one commentators thoughts:
 - ***“What are the real master powers behind the world and what are the deeper secrets of destiny? Here is the astonishing answer: the prayers of the saints and the fire of God. That means that more potent, more powerful than all the dark and mighty powers let loose in the world, is the power of prayer set ablaze by the fire of God and cast upon the earth.”***³
- What better motivation to keep praying than knowing that at a time not of our choosing God will set our prayers ablaze and cast them on the earth. Do you grasp how powerful prayer is? Listen to Annie Dillard. She writes,
 - ***(SHOW SLIDE 6) “Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke [when we pray]? ...Churches are children...mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”***⁴
 - How do we persevere in prayer when there is more waiting than action? First, we persevere in prayer because God delights to receive. And second we persevere in prayer because in His own time God will use our prayers to change history.

TRUST THE WISDOM OF DIVINE DELAY

- That inspires us. That moves us. That is what we want to hear and see. We want to witness the power of God working in our lives and in our world. Bring the fire oh God! And yet, so often we are left waiting...waiting...waiting.
 - That is why Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:8, ***“But do not forget this one thing dear friends”***. What is this one thing Peter? ***“But do not forget this one thing dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day”*** and then he says, ***“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.”***
- This is the third answer to the question of “how do we keep persevering in prayer when there is more waiting than action?”
 - Answer #3: ***(SHOW SLIDE 7) Persevere in prayer by trusting the wisdom of Divine delay.***

² Cited in Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge*, 177.

³ Torrance in Leon Morris, *Tyndale NT Commentary – Revelation*, 118-119.

⁴ Mark Buchanan, *Your God is Too Safe*, 227.

- What we want to happen now, may indeed happen now but then again, it may happen a thousand years from now. Think of all the waiting that the people of God have had to learn to trust the wisdom of Divine delay.
 - Abraham is promised that he will become a great nation but he has no children. Even when he and his wife are far beyond child-bearing years they still do not have a son. Waiting. But one day the perfume is thrown back to earth and elderly Sarah gives birth. Divine delay.
 - The nation of Israel is enslaved in Israel. They cry out to God for deliverance but it takes 400 years.
 - All through the Old Testament, from Adam and Eve on, God promises a Messiah who would come and save his people. About 4000 years go by and then Jesus is born.
 - When Jesus did come he promised he would return. It has been 2000 years and we are still waiting.
- Or think of the man whose son was demon possessed. For years this poor father had been forced to watch his son fight against a power that he could not beat. He probably tried every cure that came along no matter how crazy. He's been waiting and waiting so long that his faith had all but crumbled.
 - When Jesus says, ***"Everything is possible for him who believes"*** he responds by saying, ***"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."*** The waiting had worn his faith down to almost nothing.
 - In my personal experience and in my conversations with other people it is this waiting, this sense that nothing happens when we pray that disturbs us more than anything else.

MY WAITING ON GOD IN PRAYER

- I have been waiting on God for years for things, sending up perfume before him day after day.
 - I have been praying and waiting on him to reconcile marriages, to come and invade the hearts of couples who have grown cold toward each other. I waiting for the perfume to become a bomb.
 - I have been praying for numerous people to come to know Jesus. As of yet their hearts are still hard. The perfume is still in the bowl. Oh Lord, ignite it!
 - I have been praying for the healing of people and they are still sick.
 - I have been praying for the persecuted church, for those who give their very lives for Jesus.
 - I have been praying for an end to abortion, for young girls to be freed from sex trafficking, for wars to cease, for poverty to be eradicated, for orphans to have homes, for there to be no more 911's, for Middle Eastern governments to stop killing their people, for revival to come to Canada, for God to vindicate his name in the face of all those who ridicule him, for the name of Jesus to be exalted over all the earth.
 - I am praying for the kingdom to come on the earth as it has already come in heaven. Oh Lord, we are waiting on you. Send the fire!
- Prayer is crying out day and night, without seeing action, and still praying anyways. The danger that we face when the rod does not bend and we wait and wait is that we stop praying, stop hoping.
 - But as we have seen God hears our prayers and they are pleasing to him in his throne room. Not only that but God has chosen to use our prayers as means to bring in his kingdom.
 - At a time of his choosing our prayers suddenly are turned into fire and hurled back to the earth. Action will happen. It may not look exactly like we thought but action will happen. But we must trust in divine delay.
- There is a man named George Mueller. He began to pray for a group of five personal friends. After five years one of them came to Christ. In ten years, two more of them found peace in the same

Saviour. He prayed on for twenty-five years, and the fourth man was saved.

- For the fifth he prayed until the time of his death and yet this friend had still not come to Christ. But a few months after Mueller died this man came to Christ. Mueller had prayed almost fifty-two years.
 - Have you given up on prayer because it seems there is more waiting than action? Do not give up. Persevere in prayer. Trust the wisdom of Divine delay. He hears your prayers and in his time he will answer them in ways that you could not imagine.

JUST A BUNCH OF PERFUME MAKERS

- Many of us can remember growing up with the threat of nuclear attack from communist Russia. In the late 1970's at the height of the Cold War the World Council of Churches sent a man to investigate the state of the Christian church in Communist Russia. When the man returned he was not impressed and reported that the church in Russia was not doing well.
 - He said, ***"The church is just a bunch of little old ladies praying."*** Just a bunch of women sending harmless perfume into God's throne room. Not even 10 years later the iron curtain began to crumble as the Soviet-bloc nations of Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary abandoned dictatorial rule. The statues of Stalin and Lenin, the heroes of atheistic Russia, lay shattered on the ground.
 - Watch out for little old ladies praying.
- We want to be a praying church. We do have formal times of prayer but the best way is to spend time in prayer whenever we gather. Not just quick prayer but take a bit of time at board meetings, committee meetings, in your Community Group, before Street Teams, at youth and kids meetings, at Prime Timers, finance committee meetings, fellowship committee meetings, outreach and missions committee meetings.
 - Join our all-church prayer meeting. It takes place on first Sunday of the month. Do we want to see God act?
 - Let us send up our incense and trust the wisdom of God for when and how the action comes.

Introduce Prayer Time:

(SHOW SLIDE 8)

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.**

**Your kingdom come,
your will be done,**

on earth as it is in heaven.