

Prayer and the Power of God
Sermon by Pastor Joe Davis
Union Baptist Church – 9/25/2016

I. INTRODUCTION

I want you to think for a moment about this statement: *Prayer changes the way God acts*. How does your mind and what you know about God through Scripture respond to that statement? Some of you may be in hearty agreement that it's a true and powerful statement. Others of you may be thinking it sounds a bit iffy based on other truths you know about God and his sovereignty and his detailed foreknowledge and planning that took place before the foundation of the world.

This statement is one of the headings in the "Prayer" chapter of Wayne Grudem's, *Systematic Theology: Prayer Changes the Way God Acts*. And I'll tell you that it definitely caught my attention, raised my eyebrows and got me thinking when I first read it. And that's because it touches on a great mystery we'll never be able to fully understand and explain this side of heaven: the mystery of how God coordinates his will, man's free will, the prayers of his saints, and the endless circumstances, decisions and consequences of life, and ensures that his ultimate purpose and plan will prevail and proceed on schedule according to his perfect timing. Believe me, I've heard many discussions and proposed explanations and illustrations of how this all comes about, but I've heard none that have brought me to full understanding of how it works. This is one of those great mysteries that we have to leave with God for the time being.

And yet, as we'll discover in our study today, Scripture clearly teaches that amazing things do happen as a result of prayer that would not otherwise have happened, and that God does act in response to prayer. He does things that he wouldn't have done had we not prayed. And if we don't believe this to be true, prayer will seem like a side note to us...something we know we should do, but that mostly seems like a waste of time to us.

I like what Wayne Grudem says as he concludes his discussion of that statement I just shared with you. He says this:

“If we were really convinced that prayer changes the way God acts, and that God does bring about remarkable changes in the world in response to prayer, as Scripture repeatedly teaches that he does, then we would pray much more than we do. If we pray little, it is probably because we do not really believe that prayer accomplishes much at all.”

And this is something I'd like each of us to interact with today and in the coming weeks. Does that last statement accurately describe my view of prayer? And if so, why is that, and how does my thinking need to change? Because what we're going to find out is that a view of prayer as powerless and accomplishing little is completely and utterly out of step with what God teaches us in Scripture. And if that's the view we currently hold, it's time to have our minds transformed with God's truth! Amen?!

Over the next few weeks God's going to be reworking our concept of prayer as we study what Scripture really teaches about it. I'm excited about what God has been showing me about prayer through his Word and I trust that we're each going to be encouraged and transformed in our thinking as we examine his Word together. Today's message is called “Prayer and the Power of God.”

II. THE CAUSE-EFFECT PRINCIPLE OF PRAYER

I'd like to begin today's study by looking at the definite cause-effect principle that relates to prayer. What we see in Scripture is that God clearly responds to the sincere prayers of his people and takes action on prayers that are prayed according to his purposes. In other words, things happen as a result of prayer that otherwise would not have happened. Prayer is, in this sense, a cause that has an effect as God takes action in response to it.

Now this is not in any way to say that we can control God by our prayers or that he's at our beck and call like a genie. It's not to say that every prayer we pray will be fulfilled. That would put us in the place of God, wouldn't it? And what a frightening world it would be if we with our extremely limited perspective and often selfish motives were allowed to be in that position. But instead, this cause-

effect principle of prayer tells us that God somehow allows us to play a part through prayer in what he's accomplishing in the world. Our prayers are somehow an important part of how he brings about his will and purposes in the world.

As we pray, we show our trust in him, he delights in hearing from us, and he takes action based on those prayers. Psalm 15, verse 8, tells us that “...**the prayer of the upright is His delight.**” He loves hearing from us and seeing that our eyes are turned toward him. God is moved by authentic and sincere prayer and loves to fulfill our requests that are prayed according to his will. Things will happen as a result of our coming to him in prayer that otherwise would not have happened.

In 2nd Samuel, we see two passages that show this principle in action. In 2nd Samuel chapter 21, verse 14, we read this:

They buried the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son in the country of Benjamin in Zela, in the grave of Kish his father; thus they did all that the king commanded, and after that God was moved by prayer for the land.

And later in 2nd Samuel 24, verse 25, we read:

David built there an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Thus the Lord was moved by prayer for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel.

In both of these verses we see something amazing happening: God is being moved by prayer. Sincere prayer and seeking of him moved him to take action. In the second verse he was moved by prayer for the land and as a result held back a plague that otherwise would have come.

We see this principle at work again in 2nd Kings chapter 20, verses 5 through 7. King Hezekiah had become very sick and had just received a death sentence from the prophet Isaiah, who had told him: “Thus says the LORD, ‘Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.’” But Hezekiah responded by immediately calling out to the LORD in prayer and weeping. And before Isaiah could even get out of the King's palace, God responded to Hezekiah's prayer and gave this instruction to Isaiah:

5 "Return and say to Hezekiah the leader of My people, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of your father David, "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord. 6 "I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake and for My servant David's sake.'"" 7 Then Isaiah said, "Take a cake of figs." And they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered.

God took miraculous action based on Hezekiah's prayer. His healing of Hezekiah took place because God had heard his prayer and seen his tears. Those extra 15 years would not have been given to Hezekiah had he not turned his eyes to the LORD in prayer. Let's not ever allow ourselves to believe that prayer doesn't accomplish much!

We find more teaching on this cause-effect principle of prayer in that well-known and loved passage in Jeremiah, chapter 29, verses 11 through 14:

11 'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. 12 'Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. 13 'You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. 14 'I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.'

Look beyond verse 11 this time and notice the cause-effect principle of prayer at work. "Then you will call upon Me and pray to Me..." And what will happen as a result of this praying? God will listen. "You will seek Me...and search for Me with all your heart." And what will happen when they do this? God will allow himself to be found and will bring great blessing. Again, God responds to prayer by listening, revealing himself and taking beneficial action on behalf of those who pray.

Jesus takes us a step further in our understanding of the cause-effect principle of prayer in Luke chapter 11, verses 9 to 10. He says this:

9 "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 "For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened.

Ask. Seek. Knock. These are all things we do in prayer. And in each case, God hears and responds by taking action. We ask. He gives. We seek. He allows us to find. We knock. And he opens the door. In each case, God does something in response to our prayer. Prayer has an effect and makes a difference. We find answers, we receive gifts from God, we're invited to come dwell in his house. "For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened."

And the implication here is that if we don't pray...if we don't ask, seek and knock...we won't receive these things. James gets even more clear on what we miss out on when we don't pray or when we pray for selfish purposes. In James chapter 4, verses 2 and 3, he says:

You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Those are some pretty clear statements, aren't they? Asking and asking with good motives is important to God, and when we do, he responds. God loves to give good gifts to his children who seek him in prayer, who turn their eyes to him believing that he delights in their prayers and takes action in response to them.

We've talked a lot about walking by the Spirit lately. Well, do you want to know how to be more and more filled with and led by the Spirit? This too comes as a result of prayer. Listen to the rest of what Jesus said after the ask, seek, knock conversation in Luke, chapter 11:

11 "Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? 12 "Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? 13 "If you then, being evil,

know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"

To whom does the Father give the Holy Spirit?...To those who ask him in prayer. Our very salvation comes as we acknowledge our sin to God in prayer and express our belief in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. In that moment we receive from God the best gifts we could ever receive: forgiveness, new life, and the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. But even beyond that moment of salvation, learning to walk by and be filled with the Holy Spirit also comes through prayer. Do you want to be more and more filled with and led by the Holy Spirit? Pray persistently for it and watch what happens. Pray for his power and wisdom as you go. God loves it when we learn to walk by His Spirit and will answer that request when we fervently pray for it.

The writer of Hebrews was also fully convinced that God really does accomplish things through the prayers of his saints. Listen to what he says in chapter 13, verse 18 and 19:

18 Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. 19 And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner.

He's asking for prayer, believing that God will hear those prayers and take action on them by restoring him to those receiving his letter. He says to *pray all the more so that* he'll be restored to them sooner. He expects prayer to speed up the process!

Paul asks for prayer over and over in his letters, knowing that God responds and takes actions based on the fervent prayers of his saints. Let's not ever allow ourselves to believe that prayer accomplishes little and is not central to everything God is doing in the world today and every day!

III. THE POWER OF GOD IN PRAYER

I'd like to spend a little bit of time now looking at examples of the power of God working through prayer: historical accounts in Scripture of some of the miraculous things God brought about as a result of prayer. If you're still doubting

that God works powerfully through prayer, then I hope these snippets of history will help break down that stronghold in your life and align your thinking with the perfect Word of God.

The first is in 1st Kings chapter 13, verse 6, where Jeroboam the king tried to arrest a man of God and ended up having his arm frozen stiff in a stretched out position so that he couldn't draw it back to himself.

6 The king said to the man of God, "Please entreat the Lord your God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored to me." So the man of God entreated the Lord, and the king's hand was restored to him, and it became as it was before.

As a result of the prayer of a man of God, Jeroboam's hand was restored to full functionality. Had he refused to pray, Jeroboam's hand would have remained frozen stiff.

The next example is in 1 Kings chapter 17, verses 20 to 22. The young son of a widow with whom Elijah was staying had just died and Elijah was distraught and turned to the Lord:

***20 He called to the Lord and said, "O Lord my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?"
21 Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the Lord and said, "O Lord my God, I pray You, let this child's life return to him."
22 The Lord heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived.***

As a result of Elijah's prayer the child was restored to life. Elijah asked and God responded with power that could even conquer death!

Still doubting what the power of God can do through prayer? Let's look at what happened as a result of prayer in 2nd Kings. In chapter 6, the king of Syria had sent horses and chariots and a great army to surround the city where Elisha the prophet and his servant were staying, intending to take them captive. We pick up the story in chapter 6, verse 15:

15 Now when the attendant of the man of God had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. And his servant said to him, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" 16 So he answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." 17 Then Elisha prayed and said, "O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." And the Lord opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. 18 When they came down to him, Elisha prayed to the Lord and said, "Strike this people with blindness, I pray." So He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha.

Here we have two powerful answers to prayer...we see 2 miraculous things that came about through prayer. First of all, in answer to Elisha's prayer, God opened the eyes of his fearful servant to see the spiritual reality all around them: the LORD's angelic army was ready to fight the battle for them with horses and chariots of fire. From the human perspective, the Syrian army appeared ready to conquer, but the true reality was that the Syrian's didn't stand a chance against God's angelic army. And through prayer, the fear of Elisha's servant was conquered as his eyes were opened to the power of God all around them.

Secondly, in answer to Elisha's next prayer, the entire army of Syrians was instantly blinded and Elisha himself led them in blindness to Samaria where they surrendered and were released to go back to their homeland, giving up for good their raids against the land of Israel. They had seen the power of the one true God working through prayer and wisely concluded they didn't stand a chance! These examples are just a tiny snippet of the miracles God brought about through prayer in the Old Testament.

Moving to the New Testament, we see many more examples of the power of God continuing to work through the prayers of his saints. The sick were healed. The dead were raised. God built his church as his people devoted themselves to prayer. In Acts 12, Herod the king killed James, the brother of John, and then decided to go for Peter next, arresting him and putting him in prison. But as Peter spent the night in prison, we're told in verse 5 that "**prayer for him was being made fervently by the church of God.**" As a result of these fervent prayers, an angel of the Lord was dispatched and appeared in Peter's cell, guiding him safely

out of prison through all the gates and past all the guards. If you want to see the power of God working through prayer, study the book of Acts.

Let's look at just two more passages today that tell us in a different way about what the power of God working through prayer can do. The first is Philippians 4, verses 5b through 7:

The Lord is near. 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Do you see the result of prayer here? As we recognize that the Lord is near and begin to have that spontaneous and continual conversation with him, handing our worries and concerns over to the working of his power, what happens? We experience the peace that passes understanding. God grants us peace as we come to him in prayer and trust our challenges to him. Through prayer we come to perfect peace.

And finally, let's look at James chapter 5, verses 13 through 18. Keep your eyes open for the role that prayer plays in this passage:

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; 15 and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. 18 Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.

What's the solution for every challenge here? Pray. Pray. Pray. Ask others to pray for you. Pray some more. Why? Because the effective prayer of a righteous person can accomplish much! Amen?! Prayer works. Prayer brings results. Prayer

changes the way God acts. Prayer turns our eyes away from ourselves and onto God.

And notice that Elijah was a man with a nature just like ours. This means that the power of God working through prayer is available to us just like it was to Elijah. Are you suffering? Pray. Are you having a great day? Sing your heart out to God...another form of prayer. Are you really sick? Ask the elders to pray for you. Are you stuck in sin? Pray. Repent and confess your sin to God and ask him to give you the victory. Get other people involved in praying for you to beat it.

The heartbeat of prayer is giving up on ourselves and turning to God for the power we need. And this is how we begin walking by the power of the Spirit. The power he has to offer is the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead...the same power that caused lame men to walk and blind men to see...the same power that stopped rain from coming on the earth for 3 and a half years at the prayer of Elijah...the same power that raised you and I to new and eternal life in Christ and made us children of God...the same power that can make the weak strong and make the least the greatest. Don't underestimate the power that is brought to bear on the challenges of life through the prayers of God's children! It truly is the secret weapon of unbelievable power.

IV. CONCLUSION

As we close today, I'd like to share this quote from Dallas Willard on what happens as we learn to rely on God through prayer. Listen closely:

“When we receive God's gift of life by relying on Christ, we find that God comes to act with us as we rely on him in our actions. That explains why Jesus said that the least in the kingdom of the heavens are greater than John the Baptist – not, of course, greater in themselves, but as a greater power works along with them.”

God comes to act with us when we turn to him in prayer, and all things become possible! Let's not squander the incredible gift of prayer and try to muddle through life on our own. Let's learn to pray continually and turn our worries and challenges into opportunities for the working of God's power!