

MY 4 BIGGEST CHALLENGES

PRAYER

Brother's Weekend 2017

- Yesterday we discussed several issues that I have struggled with for years
- Let's not be polite, let's call it like it is...
- They are **Sins**
- Ungodly and unrighteous choices and habits that I am struggling to get under control

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- So, why are we including Prayer in this group?
- We're looking at my 4 biggest challenges
- And, unfortunately, Prayer is a challenge for me
- It's not for lack of quantity...
- I pray 21 times a week for my meals
- I pray 6 times on Sunday for Sunday School and Memorial Service
- Attend about 3-4 meetings during the week, so that's another 6 prayers
- Without even trying, I find myself praying 33 times a week
- *Without even trying...*
- That's the point: Without even trying!
- I find that my mind often doesn't really connect with my voice when I pray
- There is lots of quantity to my prayers, but very little quality

- I'm so busy praying, that I'm not taking the time to really connect with God, and to search out my innermost thoughts that He wants me to share with Him
- I find myself skipping the personal prayers that I should be having in order to develop the relationship with my Heavenly Father
- I'm averaging almost five times a day, but not having the spiritual connection that I seek
- I'd like to talk a bit this morning about how we can focus on improving our prayer life
- The Bible does a good job on showing us how to pray
- We'll look at a few lessons this morning, and if your prayer life could use some, like mine does, then maybe it will help both of us
- I would like begin by looking at Psalm 63

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- Psalm 63

- 1) O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
- 2) So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

SLIDE

- 1) O God, you are my God; **earnestly I seek you**

- David starts out with the right attitude
- Earnestly seeking God
- Sincerely and intensely seeking God
- I really think that God wants that kind of effort from us
- I'm pretty sure he is not looking for the lackluster, monotone, disinterested way that I often approach Him

- I like how the King James begins this verse: *O God, thou art my God; **early** will I seek thee*
- As it is often with the King James, it's not a very good word to describe the original Hebrew, but it's an interesting word that gets my mind thinking...
- **Early** will I seek thee...
- Like Early in the Morning
- Maybe it's different for you if you are not a morning person like I am, but I have found in my life that Prayer first thing in the morning is very productive and helpful
- Prayer at the end of the day is obvious, as you have a lot to go over with God, but prayer first thing is where I find strength
- My closest times to God are when I get up early and spend some time with the Word
- Meditate a bit on what I've read
- Turn my thoughts to a Prayer List of people in my life, situations that need attention, and struggles that I am going to have to face during the coming day
- And then open up to my Father in prayer
- For me, it's healthy to seek him **Early**
- But, what about another kind of **Early**?
- "**Early**" on in the situation will I seek thee
- Too many times prayer is brought in as the "*last resort*"
- Bring prayer into your problem early and heartily
- Better yet, pray for the problem before it even starts
- I have found it very effective and helpful to anticipate issues that are going to come up in my life, and pray for them before they even happen
- It sounds kind of weird, but it's actually very easy

- You tend to know the things that set you off, and you usually know when and where they are going to happen
- Often my wife will do or say something that bug me, and I can anticipate that and ask God for some extra patience when it comes up that day
- Or, there might be a Brother in the Ecclesia that you find hard to deal with
- You know when you'll be interacting with him next, so be prepared in prayer that day
- We talked about looking for your Triggers to sin yesterday
- Ask God to be with you specifically during those times
- I've prayed in advance for important meetings that I knew I was going to have that day, asking God to be with me and help me with the right things to say

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1) **my soul thirsts for you**

- Here is what our true attitude should be when we pray...
- Daniel prayed three times a day, but we don't have to be limited by that number
- Our hearts should be longing for communion with God
- No clock should ever hold us back
- A certain amount of this ***"longing"*** and ***"thirsting"*** is required for our prayers to have power
- James says, the *"prayer of a righteous person has great power"*
- Concentration and intensity are keys to this power

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- Look at his words here, *"my flesh faints for you, as in a **dry and weary land where there is no water**"*
- This is not reminding yourself that you "have to" pray after you've brushed your teeth

- This is being focused so strongly on prayer that you can't think of anything else
- This is not just wanting to pray, this is Needing to Pray!

SLIDE

2) So I have looked upon you **in the sanctuary**

- Jesus exhibited in his life the need to go off to a "solitary place" to pray
- There is a value to having a "sanctuary" where you can be along with your thoughts
- A place where you can look upon God
- It doesn't have to be a temple
- It doesn't have to be anyplace special
- It doesn't even have to be a place
- It can be a state of mind that you go to when you want to get closer to God

SLIDE

2) So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, **beholding your power and glory.**

- Take a few moments to notice God at work around you
- Sometimes when you visit someplace amazing, you are drawn to praise God's greatness and goodness by natural phenomenon and beauty around you
- Try to develop that same sense daily
- Look to see the power of God at work in your everyday life
- It's no less amazing or beautiful
- It just requires some effort to stop and look for it
- And give glory to God for his great works among us

SLIDE

- Psalm 63

- 3) Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.
- 4) So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.

SLIDE

- 3) Because **your steadfast love is better than life**, my lips will praise you.

- We have all experienced the Love and mercy of our God
- Likewise the suffering and pain of this world
- There is an implication here of giving up this life to receive the lovingkindness
- Or as Jesus taught us in his last prayer, a giving up of our will for God's will
- An acknowledgement that the Love of God is better than anything that this life can offer

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- 4) So **I will bless you** as long as I live

- Don't forget that a large part of our prayers should be blessing and praising God
- Not just thanking
- Not just asking for something
- But, simply praising God

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- 4) in your name **I will lift up my hands**.

- Paul told Timothy, *"I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands"*
- It teaches an interesting lesson - try it sometime in your own prayers

- Literally lift up your hands when you pray
- The idea of “lifting your hands” also implies doing something... Working...
- Much can be done to bless God by doing works for others
- By lifting a hand... in His name
- Our good works can ascend to God like a sweet smelling incense as well as our prayers

SLIDE

- Psalm 63

- 5) My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
- 6) when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

SLIDE

- 5) My **soul will be satisfied** as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
- Is this not the same person who was “thirsty” and “longing”?
 - This speaks of another large part of our prayers to God
 - **Thanksgiving** for all of the great things he has done for us
 - Too often I find myself thanking God for filling my stomach... but what about our souls?
 - I pray three times a day for my meals...
 - Shouldn't I thank God more than that for the full life that He has given me?

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- 6) when I remember you upon my bed, and **meditate on you in the watches of the night;**

- Not just starting the day, but ending the day with prayer
- Not just prayer but meditation also
- True, honest meditation is a great prelude to prayer
- Almost a prayer in itself
- What is he talking about here with this “*watches of the night*”?
- He’s talking about meditating in the middle of the night
- If you start to experience some insomnia in your life, and find yourself awake in the watches of the night, you’ll realize how weird it is to be sentient when everyone else is asleep
- What a great time to think about the goodness and glory of God

SLIDE

- Psalm 63

- 7) for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.
- 8) My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

SLIDE

- 7) for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings **I will sing for joy.**

- Rejoicing that God has called us to this hope of salvation
- All the while, realizing that we do so “under his wing”
- If he were to remove his spirit, all flesh would perish

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- 8) My soul clings to you; **your right hand upholds me.**

- A perfect ending...
- We follow strongly and heartily after God

- And he upholds us along the way

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- Let's take a look at **5 Tips to improve our Prayers**

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1) **Pray Simply**

- I used to think that we need to learn to pray persuasive words in order to pray earnestly
- That a meaningful prayer was one that was well organized, well thought out, and perfectly stated
- Now I tend to think, *"The fewer the words, the better the prayer"*
- God isn't looking for persuasion, He's looking for passion
- God wants you to be real
- He wants to honestly hear from you about what you are thinking, and even more importantly, what you are **feeling**
- Our prayers don't have to be long
- God listens to our cries for SOS
- God delights in a simple word of praise, like *"Lord, I love you"*
- God treasures the anguished prayer of a mother when she calls out, *"Heal my child"*
- God answers the simplest request: *"Lord, give me strength"*

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2) **Read the Word**

- Have you ever had a one-sided conversation with someone who talked continually without listening to you?

- How did that feel?
- Usually, conversations like that don't go very far
- We do the same thing to God when we pray without reading the Bible
- Reading Scripture helps us get to know God
- Reading the Bible brings life to our prayers
- If you want to have a more effective conversation with God, then read the Word
- Let David's words in the Psalms enliven your prayers
- Stop in the Gospels to pray over a verse that strikes you, asking God to work that truth into your heart
- Let the words of Paul's letters give you specific prayer requests for yourself and the people you love
- First listen, then talk

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3) Make Prayer Active

- Prayer grows dull when we turn it into a purely mental exercise
- It doesn't have to be some perfectly silent, perfectly still Monk-life experience
- God made us creative beings, so why don't we bring that creativity to our prayer lives?
- Going to a certain place in your house, or assuming a special position can send a signal to your brain: "It's time to pray"
- Some people find that listening to music can help them focus on God
- I know one Brother who doodles and draws while he prays, kind of making a mental mind map of what he's thinking
- I know a Brother who writes out his prayers like a long letter to God

- I help my addled brain focus on prayer by keeping a Prayer Journal
- Making a list of things that I want to talk about keeps my mind alert
- I pray with my eyes open, focusing on my life, so that I keep focused
- A Prayer Journal also helps to build your faith when you look back over your petitions and see how God has answered you
- Remember you don't have to sit quietly to pray
- My best prayers happen when I'm out hiking on a trail
- I found it very helpful to pray in the car when I was commuting
- Praying aloud also helps me keep my mind engaged, and off the traffic around me

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4) **Make Prayer an Integral Part of Your Day**

- The verse in 1st Thessalonians 5 has always baffled me: “Rejoice always, **pray without ceasing**”
- Is it really possible to pray without ceasing?
- How about trying an experiment?
- Start and end your day with prayer
- And, then lift up short prayers to God as often as you can throughout the day
- Pray over your schedule
- Ask God to help you with your To-Do List
- When you hear a troubling news report, bring the situation to God
- Say a prayer for your wife or child as you give him or her a hug
- Pray for the person that you're talking to

- Look for prayer moments that work in your life
- Try to pray without ceasing

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5) Pray Expectantly

- Prayer becomes a lifeless exercise when we're not looking for answers
- Jesus tells us to expect God to work. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you"
- Prayer becomes much more exciting prayer when we keep our eyes open to watch for God's answers
- Prayer become much more real when we **EXPECT** God to Answer, and actively look for that answer in our life
- Sometimes I wonder how many answers we miss because we don't really expect God to respond, and we aren't looking for it
- Or worse, we are looking in the wrong area, because we think we know what God should do in our life
- You know the old joke, *"I sent you two lifeboats and a helicopter, what else do you want?"*
- Developing habits like these are not something that comes easily
- Building a relationship with God that is dynamic and vital takes commitment and time
- It has always been hard for man to honestly connect with his Creator
- John taught his disciples how to pray, and Jesus was asked by his own disciples
- Jesus gave his disciples a simple example to follow, but the real value came in Jesus' instructions regarding their mindset when praying
- Jesus doesn't want us to seem lost and disconnected to God
- Christ wants us to have as close a relationship with His Father as he did

- Look at what Jesus says in Matthew 6

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- Matthew 6:5-8

- 5) “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.
- 6) But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

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- Don't be **hypocritical**
- Approach your Father with the right attitude
- You aren't doing this to impress anyone
- You are doing it to improve your relationship with God

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- Do it **secretly**
- Jesus actually goes so far as to say that you should hold this relationship private
- This is an intimate, close, personal thing
- It isn't intended to be public
- It isn't intended for others to see
- Find someplace where you can be far away from all of the pretense
- Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God
- Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage
- Shift the focus from you to God, and you will begin to sense His grace

- This is about you and your Father

SLIDE

- Matthew 6:5-8

- 7) “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.
- 8) Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

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- Don't be **wordy**, or flowery, or clever
- You don't have to!
- This is your Father your dealing with!

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- God knows better than you do what you need
- It doesn't matter how cute your get in your words, it's not going to change things
- God is looking for what is in your heart, not what's on your lips
- I'd like to look at one more Psalm, from a man who really knew how to pray

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- Psalm 103:1-5

- 1) Bless the Lord, O my soul, and **all that is within me**, bless his holy name!
- 2) Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits,
- 3) who **forgives all your iniquity**, who **heals all your diseases**,
- 4) who **redeems your life** from the pit, who **crowns you with steadfast love** and mercy,
- 5) who **satisfies you with good** so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

- What an amazing appreciation of God David had

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- God **forgives** us

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- God **heals** us

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- God **saves** us

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- God **crowns** us

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- God **satisfies** us
- Or, at least I pray that God satisfies us
- I pray that we find all that we seek in our Heavenly Father
- I pray that the things that we long for, and are missing in our lives, are filled by God
- I think that God created us with a sense that's something is missing
- God created us to not really be complete, not satisfied, not fulfilled
- God created us yearning for something else, and that something is found in Him
- He wants us to seek Him
- He wants us to come to Him in Prayer
- Before we close our last class, I wanted to share one last verse that spoke to me about our study this weekend

- I think in a very real sense this verse speaks to **Patience, Pride, Pornography** and **Prayer...**

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- 1st Peter 3:8-12

- 8) **Finally**, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, **brotherly love**, a tender heart, and a **humble** mind.
- 9) Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.

SLIDE

- 1st Peter 3:8-12

- 10) For “Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit;
- 11) let him **turn away from evil** and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it.
- 12) For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their **prayer.**”