

- Pastor Keith Madsen
Sunday, 11/22/15

“Five Encouragements: Prayer is Powerful”

James 5:13-18

As most of you know by now, as I am approaching the time of my retirement, I am focusing my last ten sermons on the ten thoughts I want to leave this church. The first five were challenges which I have presented to this church as you move forward, and the last five will be thoughts of comfort I want to encourage you with. My previous “encouragement” messages were reminders that you are not alone, that God will direct you, and that when you work for God’s kingdom, you can make an eternal difference through what you do.

The fourth encouragement is to remind you that *prayer is powerful*. This is the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and I think this is a particularly relevant emphasis for Thanksgiving. While we all have much to be thankful for, one of the principal things we can thank God for is that He is a God who listens to us!

Sometimes when people are in a situation which they consider to be desperate – a loved one is near death, a relationship seems irreparably destroyed, an important project seems doomed to failure – sometimes then people will say something like, “There is nothing we can do now, but pray!” That kind of sounds like the person thinks the situation is hopeless, doesn’t it? “I know it’s totally inept, but it’s all we can do!” Why not rather say, “We still have one powerful weapon left – prayer!”

Scripture consistently speaks of the power of prayer in all kinds of tough circumstances. In our passage of Scripture for today, James refers to one of them – Elijah. Remember, we talked about Elijah a couple of weeks ago. He felt alone and defeated and then God spoke to him through the quiet of a still, small voice, while on Mount Horeb. But the situation to which James refers happens before that. Because of the evil of Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah prayed that it wouldn’t rain. It was a sign meant to get these evil rulers to repent. And indeed, it did not rain for 3 ½ years. Then to show that the power of prayer works, he prayed again, and it rained, and there was a great harvest.

James could have referred to many more such incidences in Israel’s history. Just looking at a concordance about the times Moses prayed for guidance and strength, he prayed when Pharaoh resisted his call to free God’s people, he prayed for the people in the wilderness when they were besieged by serpents, and he prayed on behalf of the people when God wanted to give up on them. The power of prayer got them through the Wilderness to the Promised Land.

Or what about prayer in the life of Hagar, the slave woman forced to bear a child for Abraham because Sarah was childless. She nearly died in the wilderness, and then she prayed to God. And God showed her where she could find provisions, and he saved both her and her son Ishmael.

And James could have sited an example closer to his own time – the Apostle Peter. Peter had been arrested by King Herod for preaching the gospel. He was planning to kill Peter, and so the church prayed earnestly. God miraculously sent an angel and Peter was released.

Our church can add our own testimonies to the power of prayer. We prayed for former pastor Dick Birdsall, and he is still alive and being obnoxious over 25 years since doctors thought he would have died. Prayer is powerful and effective! Let's be thankful! And there are many others of you who have done better than the doctors expected, because of prayer. Luke Bowen still struggles a lot with his health, but he has overcome so much! Who can say whether or not he is still with us because of the prayers said for him? And what about our prayers for our church? When I came as Pastor nearly five years ago, I was told that this church couldn't guarantee I would have a position beyond two years, because people weren't sure the church would last beyond that. The feeling of many was that the church was on its last legs. And here we are now five years later, and there is a positive spirit in the air about our future. Prayer is powerful and effective! Let's be thankful! And would the search committee have been led so quickly to Britt Carlson as next pastor, were it not for the power of our prayers?

None of this is to say that we always get exactly what we pray for. Most of us have had the experience of praying for a loved one, and the results of our prayer were not as hoped for. This even happens to the best of Christians. C.S. Lewis, the great Christian author, writer of the *Chronicles of Narnia* had similar feelings after his wife died of cancer. He wrote in his book *A Grief Observed*, "When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing [God], so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be – or so it feels – welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence."

But, lest I leave his story on that note, his faith came back strong. He realized that part of the problem was his own emotional state. He wrote:

"The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it: you are like the drowning man who can't be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear."

So, although prayer is indeed "powerful and effective", sometimes there is a problem with our own receptivity to the answers God is giving. I have become aware that sometimes people have sent me e-mails that were bounced back to the sender. In those situations, it's not that people aren't communicating with me. It's just that the system I am a part of is not letting me receive the messages. Maybe that's how it is when we think God has fallen silent with us. He sends the message, but we keep bouncing them back to him. When that happens, pretty soon you just stop sending the messages.

In our world today we are so used to having our grievances taken care of so promptly, or else we take our business elsewhere. So it's frustrating if we go to God and he doesn't pull us out of our crisis promptly. But there are no other gods to go to. And there are no other human beings we can go to who can help like God can. Really, our frustration is that we want everything done according to *our* time schedule. But God doesn't work that way! He isn't just another business that exists to follow our pleasure. We must let God be God! We must trust him that he will help us at the appropriate time. Waiting for when that time comes is what faith is about. Like our Introit says, "In His Time"!

Rabbi Harold Kushner is another one who knows that prayers are answered, but not always in the way we expect. He is a Jewish Rabbi who wrote a popular book a number of years ago called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He heard from one young widow who was disappointed in prayer, because it didn't keep her husband from dying. He wrote to her, "You didn't get a miracle to avert a tragedy. But you discovered people around you, and God beside you, and strength within you to help you survive the tragedy. I offer that as an example of prayer being answered." Kushner didn't just say these things from an academic perspective. He had a son who died at age 14 of the disease "progeria", or rapid aging. He knew what it meant to feel God's presence when you feeling like you're going under.

So what do you do when your prayers are not answered in the way you wanted them to be? Gideon was a man who lived in the early history of Israel. He lived at a time when Israel was being oppressed by a people called the Midianites. Gideon couldn't understand why God wasn't listening to their prayers for help. His story is told in the sixth chapter of Judges. Gideon had been hiding from the Midianite raiders, threshing his grain in a wine press, instead of out in the open country, where the Midianites could see him and steal his grain. An angel appeared to him and told him that God was with him. Gideon's response is classic: "But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all of this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?'" I think that is a classic question because I can see it being asked just as naturally in so many current situations. "The Lord is with you, parents of Newtown, Connecticut and Roseburg, Oregon!" "But, Sir, if the Lord is with us, then why did our children get shot by crazed gunmen, and why is our nation doing so little to keep it from happening again?" "The Lord is with you, people of Paris, France!" "But Sir, if the Lord is with us, then why did terrorists kill over 130 innocent people, when all they were doing was enjoying life?" In His Time. In His time.

Can we pray out our hearts' concerns, and still let God be God? Can we pray for the future well-being of this church, that God will continue to use this church to share his love, grace and forgiveness with the people of Issaquah and Sammamish; that God will continue to use this church, as he has in the past, to care for the homeless, the sick, the poor and the distraught -- but still let God be God? Prayer is "powerful and effective" – but it does not make *us* God. God will be the one to decide this church's future. But we need to decide our church's *present faithfulness*. Will we continue to testify in word and deed to the love and grace of God? And will we continue to pray for God's blessings on those efforts? One way or the other, those prayers will be *powerful and effective!*