

The Life You've Always Wanted
Interrupting Heaven – the practice of prayer
September 4, 2005

Introduce Bruce Almighty Clip:

God has given Bruce Nolan the powers of God. In this scene, Bruce is hearing voices in his head and discovers that they are prayers, and he tries to find an effective way of dealing with all of them.

BRUCE ALMIGHTY CLIP: 58:21-1:00:47

Clip begins with Bruce's hands covering his face
Ends with Computer "Yahweh" and "you've got prayers"

Immediately after this scene, Bruce decides that to answer the prayers individually just takes too much time. So he finds a way to "reply to all" and he answers YES to all the prayers at one time.

Interrupting Heaven

That may be the way Bruce does it, but as we find out later in the movie, one blanket answer of "yes" to every prayer causes chaos and hysteria.

[slide] Biblical pictures of prayer

God, in actuality, finds another way to deal with prayers. There is a wonderful picture of the way God respects and listens to prayer in the Bible. It comes from **[add to slide] Revelation 8:1-4** . And the scene is set in heaven. Usually in these heavenly scenes in Revelation, all the earth and all the angels and all heavenly creatures are endlessly praising God. But here's what happens in this scene.

John writes that there is a silence of about a half an hour (time doesn't mean that much in Revelation), and during this silence, an angel comes to the altar of God with incense, which represents the prayers rising up from the earth.

We usually think of events on earth being interrupted because of actions taken in heaven. Here we have it the other way around. All of heaven comes to a standstill. The endless songs and praises of heavenly hosts suddenly stop. Why? Because someone is praying. All of heaven stops so that the prayers of the saints, yours and mine, can rise before God. They are heard, they matter. Isn't it amazing that the prayers of human beings, like you and me, interrupt heaven? What an amazing picture of prayer!

We get it into our minds somehow that prayers need to be filled with very expressive words, altruistic motives, and spoken in "preacher voice".

But when I looked at prayers in both the old and new testaments, I was surprised at what I found: Sometimes it's quite the opposite of what I do –

Abraham – **[add to slide] Gen 18:16-33** - Abraham Haggles with God over how many righteous people it would take for God to spare the city of Sodom.

Persistent widow – **[add to slide] Luke 18:1-5** - Picture of prayer being like nagging – persistently hounding the judge to do justice.

A story Jesus tells about the nature of prayer - **[add to slide] Luke 11:1-10** – is that a guy goes to a friend in the middle of the night with a need for bread. Jesus says that it's not because the man is a friend that he gets the bread, it is because of his boldness. Because he ASKED BOLDLY.

This is a quite different look than the humble selfless prayers I think I am supposed to pray. I have trained myself in prayer, to try to get the selfish out. Not to ask for my DESIRES. Here is a radically different picture than that. These stories speak of a God who relishes frank conversation. These are pictures of God who loves a heart to heart.

These pictures don't look like what typically comes to my mind when I think of prayer. The picture of haggling, relentlessness, and boldness – kind of like wrestling with God (also a picture of prayer from Genesis 32) – almost argumentative in laying our will before God's will, our hopes next to God's hope, our desires along-side God's desires and working it out.

So I want to invite us today to take a fresh look at prayer. Some of us in this room pray regularly and consistently. You might be what is sometimes named a “prayer warrior”. Others of us here may not be very consistent in prayer, or may just be beginning to practice prayer in your life. I hope that no matter where you are on the prayer spectrum, you will find something today that God wants to show you about your prayer life.

So let's start with a very basic belief about prayer:

[slide] Prayer changes things

Sometimes I get so busy with the work of the church that I forget that PRAYER IS THE WORK OF THE CHURCH. Prayer changes things.

Some years back now, someone handed me an article from one of the major news magazines about prayer. They gave it to me for two reasons; it was about prayer, and it was research done at Duke University Medical Center.

In a study of the effects of prayer in healing, Duke researchers took patients with similar ages, procedures/illnesses and typical healing times and divided them into three groups: 1) patients who were held in prayer and knew it, 2) patients who were held in prayer but did not know it, and 3) patients who were not being held in prayer.

Here's what they discovered. The people who knew they were being prayed for healed more quickly than the other groups, and the slowest group to heal were the patients who weren't being held in prayer.

Prayer changes things: Hearts, our families, our attitudes, our goals and ambitions. It changes our world. Prayer makes a difference. That's why prayer is something we highly value here at Saint Paul's.

Jesus, before many of his miracles, spent time in prayer. In fact, the picture we get in the beginning of Luke 11 is a scene of the disciples who are wondering how to pray like Jesus prays. Why? Because although they don't understand it, they can see that Jesus commitment to prayer is connected to his power and ability to change things on earth.

So they ask him to teach them to pray. And the prayer he teaches them is what we now call the Lord's Prayer.

Most of us believe in what we call the "power of prayer". We believe that prayer helps, prayer effects change, prayer brings hope and power into our lives or the lives of others. Prayer changes things. We have no greater model for this than the example of Jesus.

So we believe that prayer changes things, but how do we practice prayer in our life? If we're just beginning, what do we do? Or if we've been practicing prayer for a long time, what reminders do we need?

So as we take a look at prayer, I want to give you **[slide] three tips or reminders about prayer**, and the first is to keep it simple.

[slide] Keeping Prayer Simple

Sometimes we can over complicate and over think things, including prayer. So let's begin by remembering that prayer is a fairly simple thing to do. And I want to share with you a few tips to help you make prayer a regular part of your life and keep it simple.

[slide] 1. consistent time

Often in scripture, Jesus gets up early to pray. So one model from him is to start your day with prayer. What is important here is not that prayer needs to be the first thing in your day, but your best time of the day.

If, like me, you wear grumpy pants first thing in the morning, then maybe you want to wait until a better time of day to have a conversation with God.

It doesn't matter when, but it does help to set a time and keep it consistent.

Also, another thing we do is we think we need to set a long time. Don't start out thinking you have to do 20 minutes. If you are not already spending regular time in prayer, Start with 5. Do 5 minutes in prayer consistently. Keep it simple. If you need to give more time to God than that, fine, do more. But don't underestimate what God can do in a little bit of time.

[slide] 2. consistent place

Jesus was warning his followers once not to pray extravagant, lavish prayers out in public places where people would be impressed. IF you do, I think his words were, you have received your reward. Rather, do it privately, like in a closet.

Now I don't know about you, but my closet is not a very inspiring place. But Jesus' point was not about being in a closet, but keeping your prayers between you and God. So you don't need a prayer closet, but you do need a consistent place where you pray where it is just between you and God.

[slide] 3. simply be yourself

I've mentioned this in one fashion already. But be true to you. Be honest and straight-up. We can't go before God pretending anything. We can't go pretending that we don't want something to happen in our lives, our children's lives, our friend's lives, when we ache for it. But we get afraid to ask for it out-right because it may sound selfish.

My goal is that my prayers are something like this. "Lord, here's what's going on my heart. Here is my issue, my desire, my hope. This is what I want to see happen. But you tell me, Lord, is this what you want for me?"

Then I try to give it to you and trust God with it.

If it is not God's will, guess what. You'll find out and then we adjust our will to God's.

But sometimes we approach prayer as if we are putting our best face on before God, when God already knows what is in the heart. So share from the heart, honestly and openly. That opens the door for God to do some heart-surgery on us when we need it.

[slide] 4. keeping connected

Many of us suffer from a form of Spiritual ADD. That is, when we start praying, our mind goes all over the place. Good news, we're not alone. Some of the great spiritual leaders suffer the same thing.

Henri Nouwen, a great spiritual writer, says that when we start to pray, our thoughts start jumping around like monkeys jumping on banana trees.

2 suggestions to help:

1. When you sit down, just take a few moments to calm down. Invite God to be with you. This is called centering. It is when we center our mind and our soul on the presence of God with us.

2. After centering, if your mind wanders to something important, or someone, let your prayers follow it. Maybe your mind is leading you to something you need to pray about. One day, I was having trouble in prayer. I could not get my mind off of someone that I was a bit angry with. I tried to shake it off a few times and go back to prayer, but it just

kept creeping in. So then, I realized that maybe I need to be praying about this? Ya think?

Don't go chasing all the monkeys, but after they settle down in a time of centering, if one walks off, you might want to pray after it.

So that's little bit about keeping prayer simple. There's just a couple more quick reminders or tips from my reviewing of prayer in the Bible that I want to share. The next one is that we are called to pray for others. And we call this intercessory prayer, or prayers we lift on behalf of others.

[slide] Intercessory prayer

Prayer for others is not on the recommended list, biblically speaking. It is on the command performance list. Any time we are in prayer, we should be moving our conversation with God out from just our own personal needs to the needs of others.

One of my favorite stories about intercessory prayer comes from Tony Campolo. Tony is a religion teacher at some college, an evangelist, a social reformer, a preacher and a humorist all rolled into one.

Tony was about to preach at a Pentecostal college, and a prayer meeting just before the service was held for him. Eight men took Tony to a back room of the chapel, had him kneel, laid their hands on his head, and began to pray. That's a good thing, wrote Tony, except that they prayed a long time, and the longer they prayed, the more tired they got, and the more tired they got, the more they leaned on his head.

To make matters worse, one of the men was not even praying for Tony: He went on and on praying for somebody named Charlie Stoltzfus: "Dear Lord, you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in that silver trailer down the road a mile. You know the trailer, Lord, just down the road on the right hand side." (Tony said he wanted to tell the guy that it was not necessary to furnish God with directional material.)

"Lord, Charlie told me this morning he's going to leave his wife and three kids. Step in and do something, God. Bring that family back together."

Tony writes that he finally got the Pentecostal preachers off his head, delivered his message, and got in his car to drive home. As he turned onto the Pennsylvania Turnpike, he noticed a hitchhiker. We'll finish the story in Tony's words...

We drove a few minutes and I said: "Hi, my name's Tony Campolo. What's yours?" He said, "my name is Charlie Stoltzfus." I couldn't believe it.

I got off the turnpike at the next exit and headed back. He got a bit uneasy with that and after a few minutes he said, "Hey mister, where are you taking me?" I said, "I'm taking you home." He narrowed his eyes and asked, "Why?"

I said, "Because you just left your wife and three kids, right?" That blew him away. "Yeah, yeah that's right." With shock written all over his face, he plastered himself against the car door and never took his eyes off me.

Then I really did him in as I drove right to his silver trailer. When I pulled up, his eyes seemed to bulge as he asked, "how did you know I lived here?" I said, "God told me." (I believe God did tell me...)

When he opened the trailer door his wife exclaimed, "You're back! You're back!" He whispered in her ear and the more he talked, the bigger her eyes got.

Then I said with real authority, "The two of you sit down. I'm going to talk and you two are going to listen!" Man did they listen! That afternoon I led those two young people to Jesus Christ.

Now it's not often, at least in my experience, to have prayers answered in such dramatic fashion. We pray for others because we believe that prayer can change things...sometimes that change is in them, or in their circumstances or their faith. And sometimes the change that happens by praying for others happens in us.

I think that's what Jesus had in mind when he told us to pray for our enemies. Check out [slide] **Matthew 5:44** with me. Jesus says, ***But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*** I think Jesus' motive is that those prayers for those we would call our enemy or our nemesis, or that we harbor ill-will toward, will not just change the other person. They will open and soften our heart, they will change us & our attitudes, and transform our lives, making us, as Jesus says later in that passage, "children of our Father in heaven."

So, keep prayer simple, be sure to pray for others, and remember that prayer is key to our relationship with God.

[slide] Prayer as relationship

More than anything else, prayer is a concrete expression of our personal relationship with God. Prayer is "talking with God about what we are doing together."

In addition to all the other work that gets done through prayer, perhaps the greatest work of all is the knitting of the human heart together with the heart of God.

Richard Foster writes of a friend walking through a shopping mall with his two-year old son. The boy was cranky and out of sorts and nothing would settle him down.

When nothing else works, the father finally picks up his son, holds him in his arms and begins to sing him a song that he makes up as he goes along, "I love you. I love the way you laugh. I'm glad I get to be your dad."

Suddenly, this song does what nothing else could do. His son's eyes get wide, his mouth closes and grins, he nestles into his father's chest and listens all the way out to the car.

When his father puts him into the car seat and buckles him in, his son throws out his arms and says, "Sing it to me again, Daddy. Sing it again."

Prayer is like that. With simplicity of heart we allow ourselves to be gathered up into the arms of our loving Father and let him sing his love song over us.

Sing it again daddy, sing it again!

We really do have a loving God who loves us so much and longs to relate to us so much that when we pray, heaven is interrupted. God's schedule is put on hold and your drop-in visit rises to the top of the priority list. You are that important to God.

So use this tool God has given us called prayer. Use it regularly. God wants to share some amazing things with you. Things that will change your life. Things that will lead you into the abundant life Jesus talks about. Things that will change your heart, transform your life, and lead you into the life you've always wanted.

And for today, that is the good news of Jesus Christ...

Let's interrupt heaven together...