

Praying to The God Who Hears

Culture of Grace: Habits and Practices of GracePoint Church / Psalm 65

Introduction:

Last week, we began a new series titled “Culture of Grace,” to start the year by looking at some of the habits and practices, as means of grace, we prioritize here at GracePoint Church and why. We opened this series by looking at Psalm 19 together to see the power and value of God’s Word, seeing how God uses His Word to provide His grace to us, as it revives our souls, gives us wisdom, rejoices our hearts, and enlightens our eyes. Today, we turn our attention to another means of grace, prayer, to see how Psalm 65 calls us to be a people who pray to the God who hears. Church, prayer is an essential means of grace that God consistently calls us to pursue. Consider some encouragements from the New Testament alone. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 calls us to “pray without ceasing.” Philippians 4:6 says, “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Colossians 4:2 says, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” And Romans 12:12, to “be constant in prayer.” We’re called to pray for one another, and those who persecute us. To pray for the sick and our leaders. Pray when anxious, for forgiveness, and to avoid temptation. For our daily needs, wisdom, and the gospel to spread. Martin Luther was right to say, “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.” And God provides precious promises for answering our prayers. We can have confidence to draw near and make our requests because the blood of Christ opened the way to God. We can know God’s ear is bent towards us, ready to answer. But, why do we so often lack a desire and commitment to prayer? I think it is likely because we haven’t buried into our hearts a deep and abiding conviction of what God does through our prayers. I say this from a personal conviction that God brought about during my time overseas. As I interacted with Christians from cultures different than mine, I recognized quickly they held to a deeper conviction of what God does through prayer than I had. Through my time with these brothers and sisters, receiving their requests for prayer, and hearing them pray, I realized my need for a deeper and more abiding conviction of the power and necessity of prayer. And, church, whether you are like me in this, or have a thriving prayer life, I want to call us this morning to build a greater expectation in our hearts for what God does through our prayers. To do this, I want to consider 4 truths I see from Psalm 65 related to prayer. The first truth, in verses 1-2, is that,

GOD HEARS THE PRAYERS OF THOSE WHO COME TO HIM

Follow the flow of verses 1-2 with me. The title shows us this psalm is meant to be sung, it is “TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID. A SONG.” And Verse 1 shows its primary function is to call people to praise God. David says, “Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed.” The parallel lines, communicating one truth, suggest that praise is the appropriate way vows are performed. This is saying it is right to bring praise and offerings of thanksgiving before God, because it is due to Him, or fitting for Him. Then, verse 2 focuses on why praise is due to God. Look there with me, “O you who hear prayer, to you shall all flesh come.” David makes an emphatic statement about God, God hears prayer. And because God hears prayer, he envisions all flesh coming to Him. Focus in on what the flow of these verses is calling our hearts to do. David is saying, give praise to God because it is fitting for Him as the one who hears the prayer of all who come to Him. The rest of this psalm is going to give 3 truths related to the prayers God has heard and answered to bolster this call to praise, but reflect on this truth for now. The God of the universe hears your prayer when you come to Him. Just let that sink in. The one who placed the stars in the sky and knows them by name hears your prayer. The God who says all the nations are like a drop from the bucket hears your prayer. The one who holds the waters in the hollow of His hand and weighs the mountains on scales hears your prayer.

Sink that truth deep into your heart and let it move you come in prayer to the God who hears. But there's a necessary caveat to understand about this truth. The fact that David points to the praise taking place in Zion, the heart of the city of God, and vows or offerings being made, reveals that we must come to God on His terms. These are the location and ways that the Israelites were called to approach God. The prayers of all who come to God are heard when they come to Him rightly. In John 9:31, a healed blind man says, "We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him." Likewise, in 1 John 5:14, the apostle John says, "And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us." These verses aren't designed to make you timid in prayer, or suggest you need to be sinless or ask for the perfect things to be heard and answered. They are meant to help us understand that God hears, and answers, those who come to Him with hearts of dependence on His will and a longing to glorify His name. Those who seek the giver over the gift. We don't come to God in pride, making demands because He hears prayer. Rather, we come in humility because we know God hears, and answers, the prayers of those who come in faith and dependence on His power and perfect will. This truth paves way for the next 3 truths, where David points to 3 prayers God has answered. Starting, in verses 3-4, by showing us how,

GOD BLESSES OUR CONFESSION OF SIN

Pay attention to what prayer David points to in verse 3, "When iniquities prevail against me, you atone for our transgressions." This is where all prayer must begin. Without the atonement of sin, we have no expectation of receiving anything good from God. Our sin, the rebellion of our hearts towards His goodness, leaves us estranged from God. God, in His mercy does give common grace to all mankind. As Matthew 5:45 says, God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." Yet, to have our requests heard and answered, we first need our sin dealt with. So, David points to how God answers prayers for our battle with sin. Atonement is a beautifully full word. It means to appease or make propitiation. The idea is a payment is made that satisfies the penalty required. And notice, David says "you atone for our transgressions." God makes the atonement. When sin, or iniquity, wins the battle, God atones for it. This points forward to the work of Christ on the cross. Because that is where the only hope for atonement is found. Jesus Christ laid down His life as the payment for our sins. His death on the cross signified Him taking the punishment we deserved. He stood in our place, absorbing God's wrath toward sin on our behalf. And that sacrifice covered all our sin, past, present, and future. Yet, 1 John 1:8-9 tells us not to deceive ourselves by saying we have no sin, but understand that, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Church, we are still in a battle with our flesh, and sin prevails over us occasionally. But thanks be to God, because of Christ, there is no longer condemnation, and the confession of our sin is always met with God's faithfulness to forgive us and cleanse us from it. Now, notice the blessing that comes in verse 4. David says, "Blessed is the one you choose and bring near, to dwell in your courts! We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, the holiness of your temple!" The way God blesses us, through our confession and His atonement, is by drawing us close to Him and satisfying us with the goodness of His holiness. This is why we continue to confess our sin to God. Christ has provided the atonement for all our sin at the cross. Yes, our trust in His work secures the forgiveness of all our sin. No more sacrifice is required. Yet, we continue to confess our sin to God, because through that confession, we are drawn closer into the presence of God, to receive greater joy and satisfaction in Him. So, pray in weakness, confessing your sin, to the God who hears, and receive renewal through His grace. The second truth we see, in verses 5-8, is how

GOD ANSWERS OUR CRIES FOR HELP

Pick up with me in verse 5, "By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness, O God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas." David speaks of God as our salvation and the hope of all the earth. When speaking this way, he is pointing to God's help in delivering Israel.

Throughout the history of Israel, we see God move in powerful, and even dreadful ways to deliver His people when they cry for help. Think of their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. That is why David says God answers us “by awesome deeds... with righteousness,” or what is right. It was through awesome deeds He delivered Israel. And verses 6-7 expound on God’s power to perform awesome deeds. Start in verse 6, “the one who by his strength established the mountains, being girded with might; who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.” God’s might and strength are on display through the mountains being established. His care through the stilling of raging seas and the tumult, or turmoil, of the peoples. The imagery is showing how God causes the uproar of the people surrounding the nation of Israel to be calmed in the same way God stills the raging seas. And verse 8 shows the purpose of these answers to prayer. Look there, “so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs. You make the going out of the morning and the evening to shout for joy. The going out of the morning and evening is another way of saying to the end of the earth. This is saying all the earth, from where the sun starts to where it sets, shouts for joy as they stand in awe of God. God answering His people’s cry for deliverance with awesome deeds was designed to show God’s power and call the nations to stand in awe of Him, joyfully praising Him as the God who hears and answers prayer. And, church, Israel’s deliverance seen throughout the Old Testament, helps us to know how God answers our cries for help. Because, in Christ, we are reconciled to that same God, becoming a holy nation, having confidence to come in our trials to receive His help in our time of need. As the author of Hebrews says in Hebrews 4:16, because Jesus Christ is our Great High Priest, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Do you believe God answers your cries for help? Come to Him in trials as the God of your salvation. Verses 9-13 give one more truth. How,

GOD SHOWERS OUR LIVES WITH GOOD

Notice how verses 9-10 start this section, “You visit the earth and water it; you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide their grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.” The imagery of verse 9 is the rain coming from the river of God, being prepared by God to enrich the earth and provide for its growth. And Verse 10 shows this blessing coming in the right measure to prepare the ground for harvest. You see, there was no irrigation system in the land of Israel, because of its hills and valleys. So David rightfully sees God’s perfectly providing rain to prepare for the harvest. Then, he shares the result of this provision in verses 11-13, “You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with abundance. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.” This speaks of a lavish harvest full of God’s goodness through answered prayer. Verse 11 pictures God riding around in His wagon, leaving abundant blessings where he goes. Verse 12 has the pastures overflowing with lush vegetation and hills full of joy because of how they are covered. And then verse 13 describes the terrain covered in flocks and grain like extravagant clothing, ready to reap the harvest, causing all of creation to joyfully sing and shout, because of the Lord’s gracious provision. David is showing how God answered His people during harvest. And harvest was a primary means of provision for Israel, showing all who read how God showers His people with the good they need. As James 1:17 says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” But what about those times when our prayers for provision may feel unmet? How is God showering us with good in those seasons? Know that God always provides exactly what we need, but sometimes it is different than we think. This was pointed out to me years ago and was so helpful to see. In Luke 11, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. After sharing “The Lord’s Prayer,” as we know it, Jesus gives an illustration of a man asking a friend for loaves of bread and receiving it through his bold requests.

And concludes in Luke 11:9-10 “And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.” Following this, he asks what father would give a serpent when his child request a fish, or a scorpion when desiring an egg. What Father gives something evil to his child in need? Look at how Jesus concludes, in Luke 11:13, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Did you notice the good gift Jesus ends with? The gift is the Holy Spirit. The point is, boldly make requests to God. Ask him for daily bread, forgiveness of sins, everything you need. And know that God will either give you what you are asking for, or a greater enjoyment of His Spirit that will satisfy your hearts more than what you wanted. God providentially provides all His people need and invites us to come in need to receive that provision.

Conclusion:

Oh church, is your heart strengthen today with a greater conviction for what God does through prayer? This is just a few reminders from one Psalm. There are so many more in the Scriptures. Our longing is to have a culture here where we are consistently pressing into this means of grace and praying to the God who hears. The call is to press in more to this habit and practice, seeking more of God’s grace for our lives, our church, and our city. So, let me give 5 practical suggestions to help you prioritize prayer. First,

1) SET ASIDE DEDICATED TIMES FOR PRAYER

In the gospels, we see Jesus often withdrawing to be alone for prayer. He rises early to go to desolate places for prayer at the beginning of His ministry in Mark 1 and Luke 4. We find him going out to the mountain to pray all night before choosing the 12 apostles. And he would often escape for prayer after a public ministry, like the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus modeled setting aside dedicated times for prayer, so we should do the same. This can be individual times for prayer or times to gather with others to pray. We have opportunities here at GracePoint to gather with others for prayer that you may not be aware of. We meet every Sunday for prayer before our worship gathering. There is a men’s prayer gathering on Monday mornings at 7am. We also partner with a group that holds a prayer gathering for moms on Tuesday afternoons here on campus. Help your heart prioritize prayer by setting aside dedicated times for prayer. Second,

2) PRAY OFTEN FOR BOTH YOURSELF AND YOUR COMMUNITY

Did you notice the oscillation between singular and plural pronouns in verses 3-5? In verse 3 it moves from “me” to “our.” Verse 4, from “one” to “we,” and verse 5 focuses on “us” and “our.” Answered prayers that elicit praise are not just those for our own lives, but those we see God answer for others. Do your prayers consistently include requests for others and the whole church? If not, start praying often for both yourself and your community. This helps you fight selfishness, build an anticipation for God to answer more prayers, and connect you more to God’s heart for this church and the lost. And it will increase your conviction of what God does through prayers as you see more answered. Help your heart prioritize prayer by praying often for both yourself and your community. Third,

3) PRAY THROUGH THE WORD OF GOD

Have you ever thought, I don’t know what to pray or how to pray? Do you know there are prayers in the Bible to teach you what to pray for and how to pray? The psalms we have been studying are collections of prayers to pray and songs to sing. The apostle Paul includes how he prays the churches in his letters. When you don’t know what to pray, open to the psalms or one of Paul’s prayers, read them, and then pray through them. Pray the exact words at first if needed, then start to make it your own. This has been instrumental in my life. Help your heart prioritize prayer by praying through the Word of God. Fourth,

4) PRAY KNOWING GOD WILL GIVE YOU WHAT YOU ASK FOR, OR SOMETHING BETTER

Hide the truth of Luke 11:13 deep in your heart, “how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” Persist in prayer for everything you need and help your heart prioritize prayer by trust that He will answer those prayers by either giving you what you are asking for, or something better, the joy of His presence. Finally,

5) PRAY EVERY TIME YOU SENSE THE NEED TO PRAY

George Muller, a Christian evangelist, and the director of an orphanage in Bristol during the 1800s, was a great man of prayer. In fact, if you are looking to read more in 2023 and want to be encouraged in your prayer life, pick up his autobiography. You can find it on amazon.com or at christianbook.com. I couldn't recommend it more. Muller said this, “I live in the spirit of prayer. I pray as I walk about, when I lie down and when I rise up. And the answers are always coming.” Chances are you have experience times when you felt the need to pray. When you do, stop, and pray. When someone shares a need with you, and you desire to pray for them, stop and pray. Just a few weeks ago, Pastor Josh stopped by my office to ask how I was doing. I shared a concern with him, and he stopped right on the spot to pray for me. I cannot tell you how that encouraged my faith. When you are meeting about hard things, and the need to pray is pressed on your heart, stop, and pray. If you are worshipping on Sunday and you sense the need to pray, stop and pray. You can come up to the front and kneel or sit where you are. If there is one thing I have found to invigorate my prayer life the most it has been leaning into every moment the Spirit leads me to pray, and just pray. It doesn't have to be long. Church, let's build a culture here that lives in the spirit of prayer, pursuing God's abundant grace for our lives through it, knowing that we are praying to the God who hears. As the worship team is coming up to lead us in a song of reflection, and we move into taking communion together, think on communion in light of what we have seen today. Communion provides a great opportunity to reflect on what God has done to secure our pardon and make the way for our prayers to be heard and answered. Through communion, we remember what gives us the confidence to draw near to the throne of grace in our time of need. Hebrews 10:19-22 tells us to draw near to God “with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water,” because, through the shed blood of Christ a way was made to approach our Holy God. A way to receive His mercy, forgiveness, and abundant grace. As we sing of the privilege we have to carry everything to God in prayer, let me encourage you to draw near to God during this time. Think on the bread and cup as symbols of the body of Christ broken for you, and the blood of Christ shed for you. And if you are trusting in Christ, boldly approach the throne of grace with confidence. Confess your sin to Him, knowing it has been forgiven, and ask for Him to satisfy you with His presence. Thank Him for the blood of Jesus that washes you clean. Cry out to Him during this time, asking for your every need, and know He will answer those requests with all that is good. At the end of this song of reflection, I will come up to lead us in taking the elements together. Let's press into all that God has for us in this time of remembrance.