

HOW TO PRAY SPECIFICALLY

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Scripture: Psalm 90: 1-17

We've been looking at prayer in these last four or five weeks and it has been so encouraging preparing these messages, looking at it from different facets and getting different perspectives. We've been reminded of what a potent weapon God has given us to be able to come before Him and get His help, His wisdom, all that He affords us. We've looked at how to handle unanswered prayers, the silence that sometimes envelops our prayer time when we think that God hasn't answered, and what it means to pray in the name of Jesus. We also looked at the Lord's Prayer, how to take our petitions to God, but before that, how we magnify His name. And last week we looked at how do we hear His voice. How do we discern among a myriad voices that can be coming to us, that this is the voice of God and to be able to follow that.

Today I want us to look at the specificity of prayer. We've looked at how prayer ranges over a lot of subjects, but as I looked at the Bible, I found that there are many occasions when God's children have been very specific about what they hope to get out of prayer time. Today, we're just going to look at three.

I. PSALM 90: 1-17

I want to start with Psalm 90. It's the start of the fourth book of the five books that Psalms is divided into. I want us to focus on v.17, but we'll look at context too.

¹⁷ Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; and confirm for us the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands.

This is the only psalm in the 150 that is attributed to Moses. Here we get a sense of the riches of who God is, and then the depravity of humanity, and then the solution to that depravity. In that onward walk with Him, the psalmist says, "As I work, as I do things, would You confirm the things that I do with my hands each and every day."

But Moses begins by declaring the everlasting nature of God.

¹ Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

² Before the mountains were born or you gave birth to the earth and the word even, from everlasting to everlasting.

Just highlighting God's eternal unchanging nature.

Then he immediately goes to the frailty of humanity. We see that every time we focus on God in some way. We see this in Isaiah 6 too, where Isaiah sees the Lord in His holiness and His splendor, and then says, "Woe unto me for I am a man of unclean lips." Immediately when we see the magnificence of God, we are reminded about how frail we are.

And the psalmist says ⁸ *You have set our iniquities before us, our secret sins in the light of Your presence.* You see our iniquities and even more than that, You see the secret sins that nobody may know. But You do. Then this recognition leads to an important plea in v.12 *Teach us to number our days that we may present to You a heart of wisdom.*

The background to this psalm is from Numbers 13 and 14, when the Israelites were condemned to wander in the desert for 40 years. Moses, having led these people out, witnessed the death of that

generation that came out. You can almost picture Moses as he's leading the children of Israel in the wilderness, thinking to himself: "My goodness! Did I mess up? Have I done something wrong? Why are we wandering in the wilderness like this? This is a long time to be here." I wonder whether he questioned some of the decisions that he had taken, that he reached this point where he says, "Lord, would you confirm for me the work of my hands. All that I've been doing, O Lord, would you put your seal upon it that I may know that this is of you."

As we look at these two lines, there are two significant ideas that come forth.

1. It teaches us to see the Lord in our work.

Sometimes we have a disconnect between what we do on a Sunday and what we do from Monday through Saturday. I remember being part of the Lausanne Covenant in 2003, and we were deliberating this very point. And we labelled this aspect 'Mind the Gap'. Those of you who travel abroad will see that in London, they call the gap the area between the train and the platform. They have a sign that says, "Mind the Gap". The idea is that we need to mind the gap that is growing between what we do and who we are on a Sunday, and what we do Monday through Saturday.

So, the psalmist is reminding us – look at your work, the work that you're doing. It would be good to look upwards and say: Lord, this thing that I am involved in, could You confirm it? is this of You? Would this be something that You could put Your stamp on and give me the freedom to go through it?

2. To get confirmation about the things that we are doing.

All human efforts are ultimately meaningless unless the Lord is in it. "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and confirm for us the work of our hands." This phrase is repeated twice, and emphasizes that only God's blessing gives true value and permanence to the work that we are doing.

Life is too short for us not to align with the purposes of God. Therefore, we ought to see His guidance in all that we do. Moses sought divine confirmation of his work. And I want to ask you this, beloved, have you ever wondered if what you are doing is truly what God wants you to do? Has that thought ever crossed your mind, that the things that you're doing, the activities of the day, is that truly what God wants you to do? Sometimes we look at needs around us, and think that this is what I should do, without inquiring of God. Because God may want you to do something different that only your gifting and what God knows about you can accomplish. It may be a little more difficult, but God knows that you can take care of that with His strength. And sometimes we choose the road of least resistance, and it may not be a road that is confirmed by the Lord.

So, when should we typically ask for confirmation? I think whenever we are in doubt about what we are doing. It's a good time to turn our gaze heavenward and say, "Lord, would You bring clarity to this? Would you confirm it?" Doubt often creeps in when we face obstacles, resistance, or opposition to what we are doing. That's typically when we need to say: Lord, is this a sign from You that You don't want me to go forward? Or is it a sign from you saying that even though there are obstacles, My strength will be sufficient for you.

Paul writes in Philippians 4:7 *"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* The peace of God will settle upon you when the will of God becomes your will. God's peace and God's will, will never be taken apart from each other; they go together.

How do we walk joyfully and purposefully in this path that God has for us?

- We need to rely on God's strength, because He has promised that in our weaknesses, His strength will be made perfect. Paul wrote this verse in the context of a thorn in his flesh. I wonder how many times he turned to the Lord and said, "Lord, why? What's this going on with me?" And yet, he knew God looked at him and said: All that I'm placing upon Paul can make him proud. I won't allow that, but I'll allow this thorn in his flesh so that in these weak moments, he will always lean on My strength.

Sometimes, we may look at things that are coming our way and say, "I don't have the wherewithal to face this." Maybe God is saying: "It's okay; I've got you. I've let it come into your life because there's going to be a greater good." He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Such comforting words of scripture. God wants us to operate in the strength that He is very willing to afford each one of us.

- We ask for His wisdom which He has promised to freely give. James 1:5 says, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."*

Proverbs 2:6 *For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.*

Colossians 2:3 *in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

So we move forward in wisdom. One of the attributes of wisdom is applied knowledge. Knowledge is just things we know; wisdom is what we do with those things that you know. How do you apply it so it makes sense.

- We move forward with perseverance and tenacity. Knowing that God is with us, knowing that we are operating in His wisdom, we don't let anything stop us.

Hebrews 12:1-2 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.*

Galatians 6:9 *Let us not become weary in doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up.*

2 Corinthians 5:7 *For we live by faith, not by sight.*

Maybe today, you're at crossroads in your life, or maybe you are in the crosshairs of the evil one, and you're wondering what's happening in your life. Maybe you're stuck unaware whether to move forward or what to do. The thing to do at a time like this is to turn your gaze heavenward and ask the Lord to confirm what's going on in your life. Confirm for me the work of my hands Lord, because when He does, you can move forward with confidence knowing that He is with you.

II. EXODUS 32 & 33

Exodus 32 is the passage where Moses is coming down after being with God for a period of time, and then he sees that they have built a golden calf and have started to worship it. He's so angry, he throws the tablets down. Then he meets with the people and he kind of gets into them and says in v.26 *"Whoever is for the Lord, come to me!"* And all the sons of Levi gathered together to him. Then he sent them out to kill those who had transgressed, and it tells us that there were about three thousand people who died that day.

Then in v.31 it says: ³² *Then Moses returned to the Lord, and said, "Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. ³² But now, if You will, forgive their sin – and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!"*

Imagine the love that he had for these erring Israelites. In spite of the sin, he's willing to stand up and say, "Lord, would You forgive them? And if You don't, then even take my name out of Your book." But God replies in 33:2 and says, "Go forward, and I will send an angel to go before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites and so on. Go up to the land, but I will not go up in your midst because you are an obstinate people."

In v.13, Moses says, "Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight. Consider too, that this nation is Your people. ¹⁴ And He said, "My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵ Then he said to Him, "If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here." In other words, Lord, we don't want an angel to take us forward; we want You. We're not willing to have somebody else be delegated to lead us. We want Your presence.

When you look at Moses, you see that throughout his life, he saw miracle after miracle. He lived through those miracles – the burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea, manna in the wilderness, water from a rock, the plagues of Egypt. He saw God's power. He saw the evidences of what kind of a god, God was. Yet he said, "Lord, it's who You are that we want, not whom You can send in front of us. We want You, and You alone."

Think about that for a minute. So often we are willing to accept the things that God gives and focus on those things, while we forget who gives it. We concentrate on the gift and not the giver; the created things and not the Creator. When was the last time you just knelt down and said, "Lord, Your presence is all that I want, because in Your presence, the Word says, is fullness of joy." Moses was not willing to take an angel. He said, "Lord, we want You for this journey."

Maybe today, that's where you are; it's been a while since you really experienced the presence of God, and we feel and know His presence when we know Him, we read His Word. Maybe it's a long time since you took His Word and read it. Sometimes the only word that one may hear is what is spoken here on a Sunday service, and the distance between God and us begins to grow. It's like any relationship. When you stop communicating then the distance begins to grow. Or maybe you stop depending on Him. You seem to think: I've got it all together. I don't need You right now Lord. when I do, I'll let You know.

Or maybe it's a while since you prayed. Maybe it's a while since you turned to Him and said: Lord, I just want to have a conversation with You. Can we just hang out Lord, talk about things. Maybe because of that, there's a dryness in your spirit or a barrenness in your soul because you're operating in your flesh. I was just reminded of that song that Jim Reeves used to sing: How long has it been since you talked with the Lord? Has it been a while?

Sometimes it's possible to have everything. You have all the money that you need, you have enough friends so that you're popular. You have a thriving career where you're recognized and admired. Yet,

when you lie down at night to sleep, you know that something is missing, and you also know that that something is the Lord. I wonder if today is the time for you to turn heavenward and say, "Lord, I want You more than anything else. I need You every hour, every moment. I need You." Maybe it's time to just reconnect with God and welcome His presence back into your life. Is that fullness of joy missing in your life? It's a good litmus test for whether His presence is there. Moses refused to move forward without God's presence.

III. NEHEMIAH 1

I want to take you to the prayer of Nehemiah. The background to this: Hanani, one of the brothers from Jerusalem comes, and Nehemiah asks him how everything was going on in Jerusalem. Was everything okay? Then he brings sad news. ³ *The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.* ⁴ *When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days.*

He was broken when he heard about the state of Jerusalem. At that time, any city worth its salt had walls around it, and to have a city without walls was to say that we don't have anything to defend ourselves, and so were open to anybody who wanted to come and take them captive. They're living in reproach, in distress. See what Nehemiah does. God births something in him, that he should go and help to build the walls. He should go and do something about the situation. You think: What a lofty noble thing for Nehemiah to be asked of God to go and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem! He says, "Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayers of Your servants and who delight to revere Your name. Make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man."

And then comes one of the most humbling statements that you can find in the bible. He says, "Now I was a cup bearer to the king." Not a prophet, not a warrior, not a priest. His prayer was this: For me to go to Jerusalem, I need to get leave from this work. Lord, will You give me success when I go and ask this man? Will You grant me success and make Your servant successful today. Grant him (King Artaxerxes) compassion before this man (Nehemiah). Would You grant me success in this huge formidable task that You've placed on my heart?

His first action was not a plan of action of what he would do, but to turn to God and say: Without You, this is not going to happen. I cannot be successful if You're not in here from the beginning. If you read Nehemiah, you will see, and many times, every time there was an obstacle, he went to the Lord to pray. And every time he would say, "The good hand of the Lord is upon me. That's why these things are happening." He knew that as he went to God and prayed, God's hand came upon him and he was able to accomplish the things.

It took him 52 days for that wall to be built, a wall that had lain in ruins for so many years. Because the good hand of the of the Lord was upon him. God gave him success. When you look at this prayer, it ought to give you a sense of facing a formidable challenge. I am facing a mountain right in front of me, and I know that this is impossible for me to do. And yet, Nehemiah, a cup bearer to the king! Go and build the wall. Who am I? Gideon asked that question: I am the smallest; don't come to me. And yet, the smallest with God becomes equal to the task.

Maybe today, you see the task in front of you as formidable. It's impossible to come through this. The situation that you're in, beloved, is tailor-made for you to turn heavenward and say, "Lord, I need You. Without You, I'm done. This task is too huge, too difficult for me. I need You to empower me, maybe with leadership skills. I need You to give me favor with people in authority. I need You to build up my own resilience because I'm ready to cave in to opposition. Lord, I need You to help me lead

people." In Nehemiah's case, "I need You to help me lead people who have been complacent till now." The bible tells us that they had forgotten about the walls and were building their own homes.

Maybe, you're facing a challenging task in your company, in your office space, something you're expected to complete. Maybe it's a tight deadline. You say it just can't be done. Maybe it's time to look heavenward and say, "Lord, would You give me success?" Or maybe you're dealing with an upcoming exam where you have a whole amount of studying still to do, and you're desperate. You're saying, "Lord, I need success in this thing. I need You to help me to study."

Or maybe you're dealing with a broken relationship that at the moment, seems like nothing can bring this relationship together. And maybe, you've forgotten that God is a great reconciler, that He can do what you think isn't possible. Or maybe it's something else entirely. You fill in the blank. What is it? What is that mountain that is facing you? Lord, grant me favor today. Help me to swiftly accomplish this onerous task. Lord, I'll give You glory when this is done. I don't know where you are beloved, but these prayers are prayers of hope that we can come specifically to the Lord and say: Lord, this is what is in front of me, and I'm bringing it to you.

In Isaiah 63, the Lord says: The ones who are praying, tell them to bring this to My remembrance. God is saying "Remind Me." Not that He forgets, but it helps us to understand that we can go to Him with anything. Remind Me. Bring to My remembrance.

Moses asked God to confirm the work that he was doing. Do you need to ask God for that confirmation? Could it be that your efforts are on things that are not of Him? Again, he refused to move forward without God's presence. Do you have His presence? Are you sure that God is with you? Sometimes when you hear a statement like that, you think that you never get these warm, fuzzy feelings that God is with you. Some people say: I feel nice. I feel good. I don't feel anything.

You don't need to feel anything. Feeling comes last actually. Fact comes first. Fact contributes to faith. Faith contributes to feeling. What does the Word say? "I will never leave you or forsake you." Hang on to that verse. That verse is a fact. God says, "I'll never leave you." Can you leave Him, is the question. God says, "I'm there always." Like the prodigal son, we need to come to a moment where we say, "I will arise and go to my father. I will." It's an act of the will, volition. I will arise and go to my father. God waits patiently for us.

His promise, "I won't leave you." And Jesus said, "Those who are in My hand, nobody can pluck." But He will not stop you from walking away. Because if He did, He's overriding your free will. So, we need to make sure God says, "I will not." Lord, I trust that. once you get faith and fact, automatically you'll feel good.

Feeling is God-given. It's an emotion, and emotions are given to us by God. Use them freely. Don't ever put your emotions on a shelf. That's the way God has made us to feel. The Bible tells us that God feels as well. God is a god who has emotions as well. He was grieved so many times by the way the children of Israel went away. Maybe you need to say, "Lord, I need to sense You. I need to just know You, to feel this. I accept Your Word. Let this joy and this peace become so effervescent in my life that I walk like I'm walking on cloud nine, because You're with me."

And then, Nehemiah prayed for favor to accomplish the task. Maybe this morning, you're feeling overwhelmed with something that is a huge mountain or an onerous task that is in front of you. And you say, "I don't have what it's going to take to do this, accomplish this. And God is saying, "Me and you, we can accomplish it." Maybe today you need to turn to Him and say, "Lord, would You give me

success in this endeavor? Confirm for me. Don't let go of His presence and seek Him, beloved, to be successful in your life.

Amen