

PRAYER: THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY.....Mark 11:12-26
TFBC, March 15, 09

This one day of Jesus' journey to his destiny with the cross tells how significant is prayer to Jesus and to all of our Christian faith. **The temple is cleansed** from any lesser purposes than a place to seek after God in PRAYER. This has always been a story serving as a severe warning to all of us who love and build our churches with our best interests and yet smattered full of our cultural attachments.

The passing **experience with the fig tree** in and out of the temple is a strange story as unnerving to us today as it was to the disciples of Jesus' day! Cursing a tree that had no fruit though it was out of season is another stern warning to us who claim the name but stop short of pulling our load for his sake. Still it gives Jesus an opportunity to drive home one crucial point of living in real faith in God, the kind of faith that has power and really makes a difference. Jesus challenges his disciples to "Have Faith in God!" Then Jesus links it to our acting on God's behalf to make this world right. With faith and no mixture of doubt within we can speak to mountains and they fall into the sea! No doubt Jesus did! He is only baring testimony to the power of God made available through his own life of obedience.

"Therefore whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours"....with one important attachment. "When you pray, forgive anyone against whom you may be holding ANYTHING! God forgives as you forgive." That sets the power of prayer in motion!

These verses and Jesus' pronouncement are what I believe are the **AGONY and the ECSTASY** of prayer. We are told of its

mighty power, but we are told the primary hurdles we must jump to avail ourselves of its strength!

+ **Real faith means** forgiving someone.

+ **Saving faith** means a focus on continual forgiveness.....
ours and others.

+ **Powerful faith** means keeping the slate clean.....

it means open, honest surrender to God's forgiving grace.....
for yourself and everyone in your life.

You might remember the comedian Yakov Smirnoff. When he first came to the USA from Russia he was amazed at the huge array of instant products available in America. "I saw powdered milk" he said..."you just add water and you get milk! I saw powdered orange juice.... you just add water and you have juice. And then I saw baby powder....and I thought to myself, 'What a country!'"

Don't we go to church like going to a grocery store? Powdered Christians...just add water and, poof! You have Christians born, not made! There is no such powder for true disciples! They are raised up through struggles of the soul when they listen, perceive and follow him. They experience sufferings, testings of their very souls, temptations to do as they please instead of pleasing God, trusting that to please him is to find the satisfaction that we most hunger for!

A study shocked and disappointed me lately. It showed that only 11% of teenagers in churches ever go on to develop their faith, and only 32% of churchgoing adults develop their faith into a vital strength of their lives, something that makes a difference for them and for the lives around them! I do not believe it is because we never tried to ask a few mountains to fall into the sea. It is because real life change only begins at salvation, at acceptance of Christ as Savior. It takes more than just time. Faith is about training, being tested and struggling to obey when all the signs

point otherwise. It is about trying and trying, again and again, even suffering and dying for the sake of the one we say we believe and trust in.

Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him as he announced his trip right into Jerusalem to speak truth to power. Why? Because Peter believed the Kingdom of God can be obtained instantly by force. Peter had a worldly view of the Kingdom and Jesus was speaking about a heavenly view that involved doing the work of surrendering our hearts to Christ's control.

That's the **agony**. Here is the **ecstasy**. As Alfred Lord Tennyson said, *"More things are wrought by prayer than this world knows of. The whole world is wrapped like golden chains around the feet of God."* Prayer is given to us as the key to faith that can make a difference. In fact it is the greatest act of faith, greater even than overcoming our temptations. When we pray we bow before whatever is unseen, kneel to what is without hard evidence or proof. We kneel, we ask, we speak, we reveal our deepest souls and then we entrust our hearts deepest cries to what we cannot prove. Prayer is all of faith!

Prayer changes things, we say, and what it changes first is us! We know this from our Bibles' account of the heroes of the faith. **Paul** told his pilgrimage to the Galatians in chapter one revealing the secret of his spiritual power. He said, *"When He revealed His Son in me, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go to Jerusalem to consult with those who were apostles before me, but I went away to Arabia."* What it doesn't say is that trek lasted 3 years. Paul was in the Arabian desert alone with God for 3 years before he emerged with a habit of prayer that was to go with him thru all the years of his ministry, resolute and sure.

Most of us agonize over the simple daily discipline of daily prayer, when what we should have had is an experience with God so

profound that we are changed, convicted and convinced, given a foundation that occurs only in deep and serious soul searching from which we arise changed, never to look back. There is daily prayer, but there are seasons of prayer where we go out like **Jacob** at the river Jabbok to reconcile with his brother Esau whom he had cheated of his birthright. Jacob slept restlessly until he met up with the Angel of God and wrestled with him until the break of day. There Jacob cried out, *"I will not let you go until you bless me!"* Give me evidence, deal with my uncertain heart, clear my unsettled mind, make me into something true, not this weak and wobbling person attempting to find satisfaction in all the shallow answers of life.

And the Angel of God gave him evidence that he had wrestled and secured his heart. He had 'prevailed,' it said. The Angel gave him a limp! And he gave him a new confidence, an assurance, and a new name... *"God's own servant!"*

We may have daily prayers, or seasons of prayer, or closet prayers, or prayer walking, as our missionaries are newly discovering throughout the streets of cities and villages that opens doors. We should do them all as needed and as led of the Spirit of God. But the results are the same...We open ourselves to God's ways and to God's Power! We pray not to get something from God, but to grow us into the kind of Christian that God can find useful.

Elijah publically called down the fires of heaven to challenge the altars of false religion and their priests. It was a showdown! His faith won the day never to be forgotten when his water soaked altar burst into flames before the eyes of the whole nation. But do you know what happened after that? Elijah took off on a footrace 11 miles and hid in a cave because the queen wanted his head on a platter. He became so frightened and depressed that he

couldn't eat or sleep for days until he demanded that God speak to him. He saw lightning and thunder, earthquake and winds, but not until he got very quiet and quit trying, did he hear the voice of God addressing him as 'a still small voice!'

Dr. Gordon Cosby of The Church of The Good Shepherd of the nations' capitol says prayer is "spiritual combat!" Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, crying out for the blessing.

Real Prayer is hard. It takes determination, but it is that determination, that fervency that is answered with the power of God. Abraham prayed and God revealed the plan of the nations to him. Abraham followed God's leading. He still had to be reminded every day to lean on God every step of his journey

Prayer changes us when we are serious about it.
Then prayer changes things.

The child with a wonderfully successful kite high in the skies and out of sight was challenged by another friend. *"How do you know it is still up there?"* *"Because I can feel the tug of it!"* he answered. The nudges of the spirit of God will come to us. Those nudges can call us into powerful actions. God calls us into living our faith and making a difference. We can feel the tug of the cords that bind us to him when we have faith to hold them.

Here is the promise of God for all who would live by their faith. Found in James 5: 16, it simply speaks truth to all who dare.
"The fervent prayer of a righteous person will make a powerful difference."

I want to offer a challenge to this entire congregation.....

You have so much ahead waiting for you that you cannot afford to waste time. I want to ask you to accept a daily challenge, a call to prayer together, all at the same moment, daily. I want to ask you to stop what you are doing at 10:00 o'clock every day of

the week, every week leading up to Easter....to stop wherever you are and pray. Pray for yourself, pray for your family, your circle of friends, your greatest concerns, your church. You may have only a moment, or perhaps will not have the chance to stop what you are doing or move from where you are. But you can pray silently wherever you are.

You will do it best with a partner or a group to talk about it. Husbands and wives, families, a close friend, a father and daughter or son, a teacher and a class. Talk about it. Remind each other. Dare each other to keep it up with sincerity and expectation. Will you keep this vigil with me through Easter?

Can you imagine what God might do with all of us sincerely praying together! Our prayers will make a difference!
That's God's promise!

A son was walking with his father by a stream in the woods. At the sight of a large stone by the stream bank, the boy asked his Dad, *"Do you think I can move that stone if I use all my strength?"* *"If you use all your strength, I think you can move it!"* So the boy got down on his hands and knees and strained to his utmost, all to no avail! *"You were wrong,"* he said!, *"You didn't use all your strength,"* his dad said! *"You didn't ask me to help!"* And he got down with his boy and together they lifted the huge stone!

What the scriptures telling us, what we have known forever is that we have a powerful resource in our God.

Will you PRAY and ask him to help?

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