

Prayer - 3 aspects

I am scared of the Scriptures.

Why you may ask?

Because I know that every time I look into them they will challenge me way beyond what I think is reasonable.

Well, what do I think is reasonable?

Reasonable, is where I am currently at, because where I am currently at is comfortable.

I'm not sure if you can relate.

But I tend to get comfortable at my interpretation of obedience.

At my current comfortable level of faithful actions.

I recently read a report that headlined:

"Court grants parents eviction order against son, 30, who refused to leave home" Michael Rotondo, the son who just refuses to move out, has called the order 'outrageous' and says he intends to appeal. A New York Supreme Court judge has granted Christina and Mark Rotondo an eviction order against their 30-year-old son, Michael, who refused to leave home despite five notices and a cash offer to do so. The couple live in upstate New York. Michael didn't pay his parents rent or help with the household chores. But when he stayed put despite first written requests and later eviction notices drafted by lawyers, his parents were forced to go the legal route. Michael told the court he hadn't been given sufficient notice, but the judge disagreed and granted his parents the order requested. Michael called the judgment "outrageous" and indicated that he intends to appeal. Unsuccessful thirty-somethings who still live with their parents around the world are hoping that he will succeed in winning the appeal, in what would be a landmark result for those who refuse to leave the nest.

Why is this important?

Because I often feel that this is how God must view me.

Someone who is comfortable with where they are at and to help me get to the next stage of where I need to be, I need to get a judge to issue me a summons

Aka he needs to get my attention

And so we get back to the Scriptures and why I am scared of them.

Because when I read them, I realise that God, like these parents of Michael, is trying to get me to move on from the comfortable spiritual nest that I'm in and grow up another notch.

And like with anything spiritual we can get comfortable with how we understand something and we are usually loathe to have our minds changed.

And so today, I'm going to have a look at three aspects of prayer.

And I'm not going to tell you how to pray.

We'll let the Bible shape your thoughts.

When I'm researching a topic I like to go back to the beginning to get a feel from where it came from. That has taught me a great lesson.

Which is this:

I tend to, over time, get comfortable with my definition and understanding of a topic. The problem is that my understanding bias bends towards what suits me.

I think the same is true for all human kind.

The longer I stay away from that topic in the Bible, the more this bias bends towards me as opposed to staying in the Biblical centre.

Then someone comes along and says, 'hang on, have you read the Scriptures lately on this topic, it actually says ...'

And so it was with today's topic

How many prayers have you prayed or heard that sounded something like:

"Heavenly Father, thanks for today, I pray be with little Johnny as he plays in his first soccer match and with Suzy as she writes her test. Pray for my meeting today, that it goes well and the company can get the contract because that will mean a bit of extra money in our budget and be with my wife today, she's a bit flu-ish and not feeling so well. Also I pray for the church that you be with all the members and so on ...".

Or

"What job should I take, this or that one, show me Father ... "

Let's get a feel for prayer in the Old Testament.

The first time the words pray or prayer were used in my NIV version was by God:

The context is Abraham and Sarah after they move into the region of the Negev.

Abraham says that his wife is actually his sister with the result that King Abimelek sent for her.

God comes to Abimelek in a dream and says to him, 'you know you're as good as dead because of this'

Abimelek protests vehemently that he had nothing wrong.

God says, 'I know, I made sure of that'.

{Slide: Gen 20v6}

*⁶Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her. ⁷Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will **pray** for you **and you will live**. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die."*

Pharaoh's life hung on a prayer thread.

This first mention of prayer had to do with life or death with God Himself explaining how it's going to work.

In Exodus, prayer was mainly about the plagues and how they were stopped through prayer.

Stop the frogs

Stop the flies

Stop the thunder and hail

Stop the locusts

Each prayer affected the whole nation of Egypt.

God was waiting for obedience from Pharaoh.

It's like the whole of South Africa being overrun by grasshoppers, all the greenery eaten away, no food in sight and one powerful prayer was all that was needed to stop it.

Then came Moses

{Slide: Exo8v12}

¹²After Moses and Aaron left Pharaoh, Moses **cried out to the LORD** about the frogs he had brought on Pharaoh. ¹³And the LORD did what Moses asked. The frogs died in the houses, in the courtyards and in the fields.

Prayer is a serious affair.

{Slide: 1 - Be serious}

It can affect the wellbeing of a whole nation
I think we can easily forget who we are talking to.
It helps to read how the OT greats, spoke to God.
Moses, "cried out to the Lord".
It affected peoples lives, literally life or death.
It affected the nation as a whole.

Charles Stanley put it this way:

"Satan is not concerned with how many times we go to church or how many hymns we sing. He does not feel threatened by our organisations or our cutting edge technologies. But when God's people fall on their knees and claim God's power and authority, everything in heaven will begin to move and everything in hell will begin to shake."

I read that and immediately think of Daniels prayer in Dan 9.

The Israelites are in exile in Babylon and the Bible says in Dan 9v3

³So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

⁴I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed ...

Daniel is serious

And he prays a serious prayer

And in the course of this serious prayer he makes a universal statement that echoes from the days of Adam and Eve to the present time.

He says

{Slide: Dan 9v13}

¹³Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come on us, **yet we have not sought the favor of the LORD our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth.**

Serious people pray serious prayers.

Daniel recognises the break in the relationship between Israel and God.
 He attributes it to sin and not paying attention to the truth.
 The implication is that as we turn towards God and the truth and away from sin and disobedience, **his favor also turns back towards us.**

This brings us to another attribute of prayer that I want to highlight this morning.

Let's quickly skim through a few Scriptures and see the thread.

The context is that Solomon has just completed the temple
 He stands before God and Israel and prays:
 In the course of the prayer he predicts:

{Slide: 1Kin 8v46}

⁴⁶"When they sin against you--**for there is no one who does not sin**--and you become angry with them and give them over to their enemies, who take them captive to their own lands, far away or near; ⁴⁷and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, **and repent and plead with you** in the land of their captors and say, 'We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly'; ⁴⁸and **if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul** in the land of their enemies who took them captive, and **pray to you** toward the land you gave their ancestors, toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name; ⁴⁹then from heaven, your dwelling place, **hear their prayer** and their plea, and uphold their cause. ⁵⁰And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses they have committed against you,

Sounds like a familiar path doesn't it?

People sin, every person, the writer is quite clear that no one escapes that bullet.

Sin has consequences, God gets angry.

If however the people recognise their wrong doing, have a change of heart, repent and plead/pray, turning back with, "*all their heart and soul*"

Then the writer pleads to God and asks Him to hear their prayer and forgive them.

You may hear this and think, sure, I get it, that describes me, what about it?

I think one of the curses of the current age **Christian, is the confidence** that we have in **the strength of our own opinion.**

There is nothing wrong with having a strong opinion.

The problem comes when that strong opinion is not aligned with the Scriptures.

That is usually called sin.

In the Scripture we have just read,

a collectively strong Israelite opinion ("*when they sin*") against what God had taught, He sent them collectively ("*and gave them*") into exile.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that

they collectively changed their opinion ("*and if they have a change of heart ... and repent and plead with you*"),

Because then God may be prepared to listen ("*hear their prayer*")

The point here is that **God seems to pay more attention when people are humble.**

Let's look at the path an individual took.

King Manasseh did not have a great start to his kingship.

He was 12 years old at the beginning so I guess we have to cut him some slack during those years but he did reign for 55 years.

During most of those years he did "evil in the eyes of the Lord".

In a nutshell, he followed the practices of the people that God had driven out of the land.

He rebuilt the high places

He erected altars to Baal and Asherah

He bowed down and worshiped the starry hosts

He sacrificed children

He practiced divination and witchcraft, consulted mediums and spiritists

The Bible says, "He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger".

And then the Bible says:

{Slide: 2Chr 33v10}

¹⁰The LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention.

The Lord speaks to Manasseh.

Chutzpah - insolent, cheeky, impudence, bravery that borders on rudeness.

Manasseh had a difference of opinion.

Good luck with that.

Following that difference in opinion, the inevitable happened.

{Slide: 2Chr 33v11}

So the LORD brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.

You have to wonder, what did Manasseh think was going to happen.

If you know there will be seriously bad consequences when you choose to attach yourself to a particular opinion, then surely that should modify your behaviour.

Or

Manasseh did not think the Lord was serious.

All good stories have a low point and we have reached this one.

{Slide: 2Chr 33v12}

In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. ¹³And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea

Now God has his attention

One can almost follow his thinking, "Oh, is that what you meant, my mistake".

Whatever he thought, God gets his attention.

Manasseh finally comes to his senses.

In his distress, he humbles himself and prays AND IN SPITE OF WHAT HAPPENED, God heard him and was moved.

{Slide: 2Chr 33v19}

¹⁹***His prayer and how God was moved by his entreaty, as well as all his sins and unfaithfulness, and the sites where he built high places and set up Asherah poles and idols before he humbled himself--all these are written in the records of the seers.***

He had a strong opinion during which time he built up high places and Asherah poles.

God gave him over to the Assyrians who, "put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon".

Now God had his attention.

The Bible says, "in his distress he sought the favour of the Lord".

Then came humility.

Then God was moved.

{Slide: 2 - Be humble

I want to change tack slightly.

There is nothing like change that breaks the comfort of our lives.

We have moved 6 times in the last 5 years.

2013 - Capetown (Loewenstein)

2014 - Johannesburg (Own house)

2015 - de Wet's (Hoheizen)

2015 - Back to Capetown (vd Berg's)

2016 - Plattekloof (rental)

2017 - vd Berg's (rental)

2018 - Who knows, but you have to admit it's a strong yearly trend.

I hate moving.

I hate packing

There is nothing that a phlegmatic engineer hates more than expending energy doing the unnecessary.

I hate carrying heavy stuff because I have a weak back.

I like routine, it takes the least amount of energy

I hate looking for stuff because it wastes time.

I'm tired of connecting computers and setting up Internet access.

But I have to acknowledge that my life is part of a bigger picture and that picture is about my church family and what would be best for them.

Having a strong opinion centred around my comfort and the way I like to do stuff is not going to help my Kingdom family and is not necessarily what God has in mind.

It's not about me.

I need to get on board with the Kingdom train.

Like Manasseh did.

He didn't have God's agenda on his heart even though he was a King of Israel.

And so God worked at getting his attention.

And when he did Manasseh realised that maybe his agenda and God's were not overlapping and so ...

He got on board the God train and the way to do that is ...

He humbled himself

and prayed

And God was moved by his entreaty

There's a formula there somewhere.

Let's look at another example.

My life is going one way, I'm happy.

Something changes (my Family Group dissolves) and now I'm unhappy.

One the one hand I can deal with it by trying to form my life around what I want.

Where is that in the Bible?

On the other hand.

I can humble myself.

And pray to become more Kingdom minded.

That's in the Bible.

And God will move in my heart and circumstance according to His will and help me see the same situation differently.

Because it's not about me.

Anytime I'm not happy, may mean that God is trying to get my attention because the path I am following may not be His path.

Remember the alternative of getting my attention may involve a nose hook and a bunch of blood thirsty Assyrians and a long walk into exile.

So now we realise how prayer is serious

And we need to approach it with humility

What else can change concerning my prayer life?

I think this is another aspect of prayer that I believe is missing from our lives.

Let's see if you can spot it.

Turn your Bibles to Psalm 143

{Slide: Psa 143}

¹*LORD, **hear** my prayer,
listen to my cry for mercy;
in your faithfulness and righteousness
come to my relief.*

²*Do not bring your servant into judgment,
for no one living is righteous before you.*

³*The enemy pursues me,
he crushes me to the ground;
he makes me dwell in the darkness
like those long dead.*

⁴*So my spirit grows faint within me;
my heart within me is dismayed.*

⁵*I remember the days of long ago;
I meditate on all your works
and consider what your hands have done.*

⁶*I spread out my hands to you;
I thirst for you like a parched land.*

⁷*Answer me quickly, LORD;
my spirit fails.*

*Do not hide your face from me
or I will be like those who go down to the pit.*

⁸*Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love,
for I have put my trust in you.
Show me the way I should go,
for to you I entrust my life.*

⁹*Rescue me from my enemies, LORD,
for I hide myself in you.*

¹⁰*Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God;
may your good Spirit
lead me on level ground.*

What do you see?

How is this different from your prayers?

Lets describe it with a few words.

{Slide: 3 - Be connected}

**Passion - Emotion - Feeling - Sincerity - Connectedness - Trust - Closeness - Vulnerability -
Openness - Truthfulness - Honesty**

In fact all those characteristics that you would see between **two close friends**.

It's one of the reasons I believe men get this more slowly than women.

We don't like to show too much emotion.

We have a lot to learn from King David.

But I believe we are missing an emotional connection with God because when there is connection there is emotion.

Prayer is serious

Coming from a place of humility

With passion, sincerity and honesty

Let us pray
