

Introduction

Today, I'm going to preach about the open secret of Bible believing churches, which is this. Many Christians in them talk a lot about Bible reading and prayer but rarely do either. It's "**open**" because we know it's true. At the same time, it's "**secret**" because we don't dare admit it.

But admitting it is the very first step in correcting it. So, let's do that today, focusing on prayer. Let's admit that many of us talk a lot about praying but don't actually pray much or well.

There are three basic problems that explain that, each of which we need to identify and solve. 2 Kings 20:1-7, helps us do just that. Turn there in your Bibles please.

Pray About What Matters to Us

Let's first be clear about what prayer is. According to verse 1, Hezekiah, the king of Judah became "**mortally ill.**" God then told him through Isaiah the prophet that he was going to die. Notice how he responded in verse 2. He "**prayed.**" Verse 3 records part of his prayer, which implies what he did. He asked God to do something, "**Make me well and let me live.**" That illustrates what prayer is. It's request. We ask God to do or give something.

I have a family member who was clinically depressed for 12 years. He lived in the basement of his parents' home and rarely came up for anything, except an occasional meal here and there. It was hellish. So, I asked God to address the source of his depression, whether physiological or psychological, and restore him to mental and emotional health. That is prayer. It's asking God to do or give something.

And it's precisely there that many of us have a problem. That problem is a gap in our prayer lives. What we *want to pray about* are things that matter to us. But we believe we'd be trivial or selfish if we did. So, we don't. What we *do pray about* instead are things we think we should pray about, but which don't matter to us or at least matter

less. There's a gap in our prayer lives – between what we want to ask and what we do ask.

Several years ago, someone gave me an intercessory prayer book. One chapter listed movies stars, like Tom Cruise, with a short biography of each one, and asked its reader to pray for their salvation. Another listed social issues like human cloning, with a short explanation of each one, and asked its reader to pray for their correction.

Those things matter and we should pray about them. But some of us think they're the only kinds of things we should pray about. We think if we pray about our own immediate concerns that we're being trivial or selfish and God won't like it. So, we don't.

I knew a single young woman who wanted to meet and marry a fine Christian man. She wouldn't ask God to help her do that though. She'd pray about "**spiritual things**," she said, but not about that. She didn't pray in other words, about one of the things that mattered most to her.

The problem is that none of us can keep that up for very long. Our prayer lives, when we pray that way, die from lack of interest. Prayer eventually becomes a tiresome irrelevancy to us. Nothing kills it faster than pretending to be nobler in it than we really are.

So bridge the gap. Do what Hezekiah did here. His immediate concern was being healed and living. So, that's exactly what he asked God to do – heal him and let him live.

He prayed about his immediate concerns and so should we. As Paul writes it in Philippians 4:6, "**But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**" Paul's admonition here reminds me of a single woman that author Barb Johnson told about. She hung a pair of trousers at the end of her bed and every night, asked God to fill them with a fine Christian man.

That then is one problem that keeps us from praying much or well. There's a gap in our prayer lives between the things we want to pray about and those we do pray about. Solve that problem. Bridge the gap. Pray about the things that matter to us.

Recognize that Our Prayers Prevail upon God

A second problem is a belief that many of us have. It's that prayer is a charade.

I once conversed with a relatively new Christian who asked me about an issue that was troubling her, **"Why ask God for things if He's going to do what He planned anyway?"** Notice the premise upon which her question was based. God's going to do what **"He planned anyway."**

Many of us believe that. Our requests don't prevail upon God. He doesn't act in response to them. His purposes and will, we think, are fixed. He knows, in His infinite wisdom, what is best. Consequently, what He was going to do, He will do. What He was going to let happen, He will let happen. Our requests certainly aren't going to change the purposes and will of an infinitely wise God. Prayer, in other words, is a charade. God pretends to answer our requests but then goes ahead and does or gives what He was going to do or give in the first place.

The belief that our requests don't prevail upon Him is stifling. It makes prayer one of two things: psychologically impossible at worst or a dead ritual at best. We likely won't pray very much if we believe that. Or if we do pray, our hearts won't be in it. We're only praying because we're supposed to, not because it actually makes a difference that we do.

But our text makes it clear. Our requests do prevail upon God. He intended to let Hezekiah die. According to verse 1, in fact, He sent His prophet Isaiah to tell him just that. But then He **"changed His mind,"** as Exodus 32:14 says it, in response to Hezekiah's prayer. We see that in verses 4-6. God told Hezekiah through Isaiah that He had heard his request and had decided to grant it. He would heal him, add fifteen years to his life, and bless his reign over Judah. Here's what I want you to grasp. If Hezekiah hadn't asked God to heal him and let him live, He would not have. But he asked Him to and He did.

He does the same with us. His overarching purposes are fixed. But His particular purposes for specific circumstances and situation in our lives are often flexible. When that's the case and we pray, He often does

or gives what He wasn't going to. Or He doesn't do or give what He was going to. He answering our prayers isn't a charade. Our requests actually prevail upon Him. He sometimes "**changes His mind**" about what He was or wasn't going to do or give.

C.S. Lewis told about a good man who asked God to heal a woman of cancer and He did. Lewis rightly contended that God would not have healed her if the good man hadn't asked him to; and that He healed her because he had. There was a cause and effect relationship between the man's request and God's action. Our requests do prevail upon Him. He changes His mind, when appropriate, in response to them.

There's a reason He does. The brilliant philosopher, mathematician, and Christian, Blasé Pascal, explained it well, "**God instituted prayer in order to allow His creatures the dignity of causality.**" I'd explain it this way. God works to extend and deepen His kingdom on earth. But He wants us to partner with Him in doing that. We partner with Him secondarily by acting – to witness, to meet needs, and to overcome evil with good. But we partner with Him primarily by praying. Praying truly does give us the dignity of causality. It's our most significant and powerful ministry. As author John Ortberg says it, history belongs to the intercessors, that is, the pray-ers.

We've now identified a second problem that keeps us from praying much or well. It's the belief that prayer is a charade. Solve that problem. Recognize that our requests prevail upon God. Study texts like Exodus 32:11-14, Daniel 9, and our text today, asking the Holy Spirit to open up their meaning to us. He'll help us recognize that if we do.

Be Ruthless When It Comes to Prayer

There's a third problem that keeps us from praying much or well. It's tacking prayer on to "**life as usual.**"

I know that's a problem because I had it for much of my life. I was always busy like most of you are. I had a lot of things to do like practicing law, raising my family, playing ball, running, teaching Sunday

school class, and more. I knew I should pray though and so fit it in to those things. When I had a few minutes here and there between activities, appointments, and responsibilities, I'd pray.

Don't get me wrong. It's a good thing to pray like that. But it's a bad thing to pray only like that, which was what I did. Simply put, I just tacked prayer on to my life as usual.

I know it by experience. Doing that isn't enough. We might compare it to taking a shower one drop at a time. Imagine that we're dirty and want to get clean. So we sprinkle a drop of water on us. Five minutes later, we sprinkle another drop of water on us, and so on. Doing that wouldn't make much difference would it? We wouldn't get clean.

It's like that with prayer. Just tacking it on to our lives as usual – praying hurriedly here and there – doesn't make much difference. An old adage says that **"Prayer changes things – and us."** But it doesn't if all we're doing is tacking it on to our lives as usual.

Life as usual, therefore, has to go. That is the key to powerful life-changing prayer. We must be ruthless when it comes to prayer. You may not like the word **"ruthless"** but that's the only way I know of to get rid of life as usual. We have to be ruthless when it comes to prayer. That means two things.

First, we pray with intensity. That's what Hezekiah did. Verse 2 says that he turned his face to the wall. That means he turned away from the distractions around him and took plenty of time to pray. Verse 3 then says that he wept bitterly. That means he was passionate in his prayer. He prayed with intensity, in other words. And so should we. That means we don't hurry but take plenty of time to pray. And we aren't distracted but focused, not exhausted but energized, when we do.

To be ruthless when it comes to prayer means a second thing. Hezekiah was one of the most outstanding kings Judah ever had and was noted for his piety. He devoted himself to spiritual activities that engaged God – and so must we. Our prayer life must take place in the context of a larger life of engaging Him and His kingdom at hand.

Certain activities are central in engaging Him including solitude and silence, fasting, study, worship, fellowship, lectio divina, purposeful obedience, thanksgiving, and practicing His presence. Our prayer life must take place in the context of a larger life of practicing those activities. Our prayers are enlivened and empowered when it does.

Preachers talk all the time about men and women of God who were accomplished pray-ers: Therese of Avila, John Wesley, George Mueller, Hudson Taylor, David Brainerd, and more. But what they usually fail to mention is the context in which their prayer lives took place. Those close friends of Jesus practiced a host of spiritual activities that enabled them to pray as effectively as they did. To see their prayer lives outside that context deceives and injures us. In the end, it's an overall spiritual life that makes prayer the dynamic force for good that it can be.

We now know what it means to be ruthless in prayer. First, we pray with intensity. And second, we make a larger life of engaging God and His kingdom at hand the context of our prayers.

Conclusion

Those then are the three problems that can keep us from praying much or well – and their solutions. Problem #1 – There's a gap in our prayer lives between what we want to pray about and what we do pray about. Solution – Pray about what matters to us. Problem #2 – We view prayer as a charade. Solution – Recognize that our prayers prevail upon God. And Problem #3 – We tack prayer on to life as usual. Solution – Be ruthless when it comes to prayer. If you and I have any of those problems, let's solve them. Bethel Friends won't have an open secret if we do!