

Sermon Text for October 22, 2023

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Jeremiah 29:11-14, Romans 8:24-27

PRAYER (2), Scripture, Action

What a blessing it was to be away from you. Well, that didn't come out the way I planned it. Thank you for the time away, it was a blessing, but how great it is to be back with you today. It is also such a relief being able to be completely away knowing that Michael Wilson is covering and not just covering, but ministering and sharing and bringing you God's Word this past Sunday. We got my eldest all moved into Seattle where she began her work as a lawyer in the public defender's office in Seattle for King County. There was a lot to do to get her ready, move her into a new apartment, help her get her new car, get her dog situated and comfortable. All of the logistics of moving someone into a new place is exacerbated when it is across the country.

With this sermon coming up today I got to thinking of the hours and hours of prayer that has gone into her to get her to where she is today. If you are not praying for you child, or if you have never prayed for your child consistently, you better start today. But prayer doesn't guarantee a result, as many of you know. It certainly doesn't guarantee what we want. If it did then we would have to think that those who are historically oppressed have either less faith or God doesn't really love them because of the life situations in which they are in or what they have experienced in their lives.

In our continued emphasis on Prayer, Scripture and Action, today we are for a second and last time focusing in on Prayer. The first time we looked at prayer we were challenged to spend 5 minutes a day in prayer. Find the time and the place to do it in your busy lives because it allows you to keep and maintain and help flourish your relationship with God which impacts every single aspect of your life. I hope you have been able to do that. Today in our second go at prayer we will discover an assurance that prayer is based upon a fundamental promise of God which is that God wants our welfare, he wants and is working all things for the good for our lives. The problem is that it doesn't always feel that way. It doesn't always feel like God is on our side.

Both of our Scriptures remind us of this incredibly powerful and life changing truth which manifests itself in our prayer life. Do we approach God in the confidence and the assurance of the fact that he is working for our God. When you think of God do you think of

him working, always working behind the scenes even and especially when you can't see it for your good? Or does our doubt as to the nature of God cloud, cloud our understanding and our time of prayer where we are approaching him more tentatively because maybe, just maybe he is a bit more capricious and disappointed in us and we don't really get him?

Here is our hope for today upon which you can rely. God is working for our good. The hope of what lies beyond is what sustains our faith despite the contradictions of the present. Let's read Paul's assurance of this.

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Let's go to Jeremiah and try to understand his present and how is he able to say with such confidence that he knows God's plans for us which are for our welfare, our good. Jeremiah is writing at a time when Israel is in the process of returning from exile from a foreign land back into Palestine. Imagine if the entire nation of the United States had been captured conquered by Canada and every single citizen was forced to leave their home and resettle in a ghetto in Canada for generations, and now the Canadians are letting us go back home to our own land. This is what is happening to Israel in Jeremiah. One of the most tragic moments in the history of the nation has come to a close and now God is bringing us back home to settle back into where we were.

Look at vs.11, I know the plans that God has for you. In spite of the past and immediate current mess in which we find ourselves, because it takes time to relocate and resettle and get our bearings once we get back to our home land after generations of being away, nothing is the same and yet everything is the same, vs.11 tells us with confidence that even through it all, what did we say earlier, despite the contradictions of the present: God's plans for us are for our welfare, for our good, not for the harm that we have experienced all of these years, but rather to provide us with a future of hope.

In many ways Jeremiah is saying that the restoration of creation is not quite here yet, but we do have to wait for it with hope because it is promised by God. In some ways this can be seen as the grounding for our belief in predestination. Wow, what a big word. What is predestination and what does it have to do with prayer? Well, Christian hope is grounded in the sure promises of God. The fact that the future is in God's hands, where we neither put it nor from which we can take it away, is the basis of confidence and joy rather than fear and pain. This is the underlying message of predestination, it always has to be seen in the context of hope.

So when Solomon prays in I Kings 3:4-14 a clearly unselfish prayer, where he could ask for anything at all, he asked for good for God's people and not something which would clearly

just gratify himself, which he could have, it underlies our understanding that just as God's plans for us align with our welfare, so our prayers ought to have the undergirding and the clear assumption and belief that God is working for our good in all things and at all times.

When we believe that then we will pray differently. We won't pray to try to cajole God to do things our way, we won't pray for God to speed up his timeline. We won't pray for anything that works for our good and for the detriment of others. Jeremiah says when we call upon God, pray to God, God will hear. There is no greater promise than what we find in vs.12 in Jeremiah. We could stay in Jeremiah for this entire morning as I'm sure that most of us need to hear that God is on our side. When we seek God, we will find him, that is a promise. If you are not finding God in your five minutes, then it might mean that you are not really seeking him.

Jeremiah also mentions the promise of gathering the tribes of Israel which is what was happening as they were coming back to the land of Palestine. The Jews had been scattered to Babylone, to Assyria, to Egypt and beyond and now they were coming back just as vs.14 said would happen. But for us today, it is a bit hard to hear as we see the reality of what is happening in that land today. One thing that strikes you when you go to Israel are all the different languages which are spoken. Waves of Jewish people from all over the world have settled in Israel over its short 80 year history. You can hear Russian, and Italian, and all of the Ethiopian dialects and languages. Over these past 80 Jews from all over the world have left their native countries and come into the nation of Israel to live. It is quite amazing.

But for those living in Gaza and the West Bank this promise of Jeremiah makes them see their lives as insignificant. Does God have a future of hope for some and not for others who have been in that land for the same amount of time? So our prayers and our actions have to be formed by God's kingdom which strives for righteousness, which demands action that is based upon the will of God. How do we pray for Israel and that region, we pray that the hope that is promised in Scripture be able to be realized by every single person who lives in that region. From the massacred Jewish child to the starving Palestinian Christian in Gaza and beyond.

Let's look at Paul and what he has to say about prayer and the hope that we find as we go to God in prayer. Listen again to the words of Jeremiah in vs.12-14a and then hear again Paul's words about prayer. The starting point of prayer, according to Paul, has to be that God's plans for you are always for your welfare, not for your harm and not at the expense of others, but also not at your expense.

Paul addresses a common concern about prayer that even Jesus' disciples asked, which was how do we pray? Paul says clearly we do not know how to pray. If Paul is able to say that

himself then why would we ever feel embarrassed or less than because we don't know how to pray? God has a purpose for his creation and it should be our prayer to fit ourselves within that purpose. We do not know how to pray when we are unsure of the purposes of God. When we know that God's purposes are for our welfare, well, then that should definitively help us in our time of prayer.

So the starting point of prayer is our faith which is founded on Christian hope. Paul will not allow his attention to become completely absorbed in the present. Hope lies ahead of us, it is in our grasp, but it is not yet realized, so this is why patience is so important, especially in prayer. He addresses that in vs. 25. The hope of what lies beyond is what sustains our faith despite the contradictions of the present. The Christian's perspective is not determined by the frustrations of the present, but by its future hope. Things can be frustrating, even tragic, but we should never, ever despair because of the Christian hope that we have which is that God is working all things for our welfare.

Paul talks about when we do not know how to pray that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. What in the world is that about? When you are at the wailing wall you can hear these prayers that are sighs, calling out to God in a way that is not able to be classified as words which you can understand. When we were at seminary we would meet to pray periodically and we would pray all together in the chapel and it was a time that was incomprehensible, but the Holy Spirit was present. There are times when you simply do not know what to pray or even how to pray. But what is fundamental about prayer is not the saying of words, but the expression of dependence on God.

As a result, Paul's emphasis on patience in prayer is a result of knowing that God is in control. God is in charge and so God will deliver. We don't know when, just that God will. We lose patience when we think God is not really at work here so the end is imminent, like either I do something about it or it is going to all come crashing down. This is when we don't hear God in our prayers and when we lose patience.

As we read in Hebrews 11 that our faith is based upon things that are not seen, and a certain hope in things unseen. In prayer we are asking God to work, we can't always see it, rarely do we see it, but we believe ultimately that not only is God at work but he is working for our welfare, for our good. I pray that as you continue to reach out to God that you can do so knowing that God is always, always on your side. Amen.