

SERMON SERIES: "Teach Us to Pray"
SERMON TITLE: "We Pray for God's Strength"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 22:39-46 and Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 29, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

A mother and father were aware that their 14-year old son was struggling with math, and they had been helping him with his homework as best they could. Being a religious family, the parents encouraged their son to pray for God's help. On the night before an important exam, they overheard the teenager saying a variation on a childhood prayer: "Now I lay me down to rest, and hope to pass tomorrow's test. If I should die before I wake, that's one less test I have to take."*

All through this month of September, we've been talking about prayer. We've talked about some prayer techniques like where to pray, when to pray, and what our bodies might be doing while we're praying. We've also talked about what kind of prayer words we might speak or write or think or read. Using the lines of The Lord's Prayer and other biblical prayers, so far we've covered praying for God's holy will to come on earth as it is in heaven. We've talked about praying for our needs. And, last Sunday, we discussed praying for forgiveness.

Now, today, we've arrived at the last part of Jesus' famous prayer: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Because the Greek word for *temptation* is also translated as *test* or *trial*, I thought of this scripture from Luke 22 about Jesus and his disciples just before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. I invite you to consider this story of prayer with me and see how we might pray for God's strength in our own times of trial.

1—METHODS OF PRAYER

Like every other prayer story we've read this month, this story about Jesus and his disciples gives us some suggestions about the methods we might use as we pray to avoid and overcome times of

trouble. For example, Luke 22:39 tells us that Jesus went to a place “that was his custom.” It was his usual place to go. In Matthew and Mark’s gospels, the place of prayer where Jesus went after the Last Supper was called “Gethsemane.” But, here in Luke, we see that this place of prayer is called “the Mount of Olives.” That biblical variance doesn’t really matter, of course, because we can pray anywhere, by any name.

But maybe it is a good idea to have a normal place, a place of prayer that is comfortable to us, a stress-reduced place that helps us focus our heart and mind on God. If a place of prayer is *customary* to us, then that also implies that we have developed a prayer *routine*. And that *frequency* of prayer is as helpful as the customary *place*. We may not be put to the test of crucifixion like Jesus was, but every one of us will go through some difficult experiences in our lives. The more customary and well-practiced is our prayer routine, the easier it will be for us to lift our prayers in a time of temptation, testing, and trial. The more likely it will be for us to avail ourselves of God’s strength.

This reminds me of a situation Chris Hicks told me about and said I could share with you. You may know that Chris’ sister Judy had a stroke in Montana and was flown to University Medical Center in Salt Lake City several weeks ago. Not only has Judy’s medical situation been critical, but there were other logistical and financial problems that added a lot of stress for the family. So Judy’s young-adult daughter felt like she should pray, but she wasn’t used to praying. She had no customary place or regular practice to guide her. She hasn’t been a church-goer, so she didn’t have a faith community to assist. She really didn’t know what to do. So, get this: Chris’ niece actually tried asking her Amazon Echo smart speaker, “Alexa, how do I pray?” Unfortunately, Alexa didn’t give a very good response. But soon after, Aunt Chris called, prayed with her niece, gave her some helpful advice about prayer, and no doubt helped the young lady gain God’s strength during her family’s difficult time of trial.

Chris’ guidance to her niece points out another aspect of this story. Jesus served as a prayer example to his disciples, and that’s an important role we can play, as well. After Jesus told his disciples

to pray, verse 41 tells us that Jesus “withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed.” Any of us who have ever been parents know that sometimes our kids like us to teach them up close, but other times they learn better by observing us from a not-too-far *distance*. Giving them just enough space allows them room both to make mistakes and to grow in grace and skill.

It’s like parents of tiny children need to speak the words of prayer for them. Then the parents need to spend time with their children, while the kids practice speaking their prayers. Additionally, however—and this is a piece I think we often fail to do—the children need to witness us parents saying our own adult prayers. Down on our knees like Jesus was, or in some other position and posture, we need to make it clear that we aren’t afraid to seek God’s strength. Otherwise, kids will think praying is only for children, and they won’t learn how to pray grown-up prayers. When times of crisis inevitably come, they’ll be stranded and asking their less-than-helpful Alexa how to pray. No, that’s not how it’s supposed to be. Let’s prepare our children and ourselves, by *our regular customs*, so that we can all pray for God’s strength.

2—PRAY FOR GOD’S STRENGTH

Having developed and practiced those foundational prayer routines, then we’ll be ready in times of crisis to pray for God’s strength. Luke 22 indicates that Jesus did this in two ways. First, he told God quite clearly what he wanted. So earnest and so in anguish was Jesus that verse 44 indicates his “sweat became like great drops of blood.” Of the four gospels, only Luke indicates this so vividly, and even in Luke, not every ancient biblical manuscript included these words. But I think it’s good for us to recognize Jesus not just as fully divine, but also as fully human. Like us, Jesus was NOT eager to suffer and die. If there was a way he could stay alive, he would very much prefer it!

In praying so honestly and emotionally, Jesus was right in line with great spiritual leaders of his Jewish tradition. The Psalms are full of requests for deliverance from evil, for rescue from death, and for salvation from suffering. Those songs of the Hebrew people gave full voice to complaints that God

wasn't paying enough attention, that God needed to give aid and assistance today like God did in times past, and that God needed to come quickly and solve this problem right now! Likewise, the Old Testament book of Lamentations expresses the outcry of grief of the Jewish people after they were taken into exile in Babylon. Deeply painful and emotional language is expressed to God without fear of being judged inappropriate, hysterical, or unfaithful. Praying our honest thoughts and feelings is never deemed wrong. That communication is essential as we pray for God's strength.

But we can't stop there—because prayer isn't *only* our communication of our needs and wants. Prayer isn't just our To-Do list for God. Prayer isn't just our divine wish list, akin to a Christmas list a kid might write for Santa. Prayer is also taking the time and making the space to hear God's reply. Prayer is also saying what Jesus did in verse 42: "yet not my will but yours be done."

Some people misinterpret this to mean that every bad thing that happens must then be God's will. We pray for the hurricane, tornado, or wildfire not to hit our town. But what if it does? Does that mean that it was God's will that our community be destroyed? We pray for our family to be healthy and happy, but if disease or struggle persists, does that mean God wants us to be miserable? No, I don't think that's what Jesus meant. When Jesus requested that he wouldn't have to die, but also prayed that he would accept God's will, I think he meant that he would be willing to align himself with God's good and best purposes in whatever circumstances Jesus faced.

Maybe at this point it was inevitable that Jesus would be arrested, put on trial, and be crucified. But Jesus still had choices about how he would react, what he would or wouldn't say, and how he could demonstrate his love and forgiveness. Even if trouble were coming hard and fast, God could still help Jesus to rise above the temptation to focus only on himself or turn to despair or anger or blame. God could help Jesus be as calm as possible in the face of this storm. God could still help Jesus be a positive example for his disciples and others who examined and observed him in his final hours.

And we know that is what happened. All the way to his last breath, Jesus pointed others to God. Even here in Luke 22, it's clear that—while the disciples were stuck in grief and still in danger for their own time of trial—Jesus got up from his prayers fortified by that sacred time. He now had the confidence that his sacrifice would be for *God's* kingdom, *God's* power, and *God's* glory—forever. What Jesus was about to experience was going to be extremely difficult, but he had prayed for and received God's strength.

CONCLUSION

I'm going to conclude this sermon and this sermon series on prayer by reading to you the words of an unnamed soldier who observed:

I asked God for strength that I might achieve.
 I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.
 I asked God for health that I might do greater things.
 I was given infirmity that I might do better things.
 I asked for riches that I might be happy.
 I was given poverty that I might be wise.
 I asked for power that I might have the praise of [people].
 I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.
 I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.
 I was given life that I might enjoy all things.
 I got nothing that I asked for—but everything that I had hoped for . . .
 Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
 I am among all [people] most richly blessed.*

God may not take away our physical pains or give us explanations why things have to happen. But God does promise to go with us through our temptations and trials, so that we will find our difficulties easier to bear and our results better than we could ever have dreamed.

With this our heart's desire, we pray for God's strength. Amen.