

Prayer From The Heart.

Text: 2 Kings 20:2-3

Suggested Hymns:

420, 422, 424, 289, 426

- 1) Effective Prayer Is The Speech Of The Heart Right With God
- 2) Effective Prayer Does Not Merely Ask for Things
- 3) Effective Prayer Reflects A Heart That Is Right With God
- 4) Effective Prayer Leaves The Solving Of Our Problems To God
- 5) Effective Prayer Understands the Answers to Prayer

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 2 Kings 20:2-3, ² *Then he [King Hezekiah] turned his face toward the wall, and prayed to the LORD, saying,* ³ *“Remember now, O LORD, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart, and have done what was good in Your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Today is Prayer Sunday. Each year on this day the Church reminds itself of the privilege and duty of prayer. We need that reminder. We need it not only for today, but we need it for the whole year through.

What does this Sunday do for us and for our prayer life? Does it teach us some new prayers to say? Does it help us join in some new prayers? Does it suggest some new things to ask for and some new ways of getting God to listen? No. It does something much more important — important for us and important for our prayers. It tells us again what prayer is, what is necessary for prayer to be truly effective. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Effective Prayer Is The Speech Of The Heart Which Is Right With God

Again and again we need to learn that lesson. Before us we have a story about one of the great heroes of faith in the Old Testament, King Hezekiah of Judah.

He had lived a busy and blessed life. God had been very close to him, had helped him, and had spoken to him. Now suddenly God gives Hezekiah a message, through the Prophet Isaiah, ***‘Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.’***

Some of us may have imagined what it would be like to get such a message. We may have tried to realise the thoughts that would flood us in such a moment. We may clutch at our hearts and see much distress, for example - the fear of death, and the worry about our loved ones.

But as Christians we would say to ourselves, *“That is a reminder from God to pray. Apparently I have been slowing up in prayer. God wants me to call on Him in the day of trouble. How shall I pray?”* This story is in the Word of God to help us answer that question for our every need in prayer.

2. Effective Prayer Does Not Merely Ask for Things

God’s message overwhelmed Hezekiah with a great sense of need. He was king of Judah in a most difficult time. The kingdom had just been saved from Sennacherib. The times were evil. Surrounding nations menaced the peace. Hezekiah still had much work to do. But now God says, ***“You are going to die.”*** Without a doubt, in that position, most of us might say to God, *“You are making a mistake. You need me down here. I have so much to do. Please give me my health back, and postpone the time of my death.”*

The curious thing about prayer is this, that we are usually asking for things. We have been reminded to pray for *“spiritual blessings.”* We do that too, but not with the same pressure and urgency with which we ask for the needs of the body.

For one thing, we are quite sure that God wants us to have these “spiritual blessings” — forgiveness of sins, everlasting life, peace and love in the heart. But on the other hand, the needs of the body pinch. We feel them. They bite and gouge. We want to get rid of them at once. We give them the priority in prayer.

Here is the astonishing thing about Hezekiah’s prayer — he asked for nothing. No doubt he was deeply stirred by the prospect of death because he wept bitterly. But he asks for nothing! At least, we would call it nothing. He really asks for something. He asks God to remember him and his life and heart. He is very urgent about it. He ***faced toward the wall, and prayed to the LORD, saying, “Remember now, O LORD.”***

But he does not come right out and ask for longer life. Perhaps you say, *“Oh, but he probably had it in his mind! He really wanted God to cure him, but was too polite to ask. He really wanted God to cure him, but first he wanted God to think why He should take care of him.”*

Well, I don't think so. Hezekiah had no time to be polite. These words mirror his inmost thought toward God. He turned to the wall and closed the rest of the world out and told God exactly how he felt. Here is the first great thing to learn about prayer in trouble.

It does not simply ask God to remove the trouble. Something else must come before. Otherwise the prayer is just self-satisfaction, just dressing up wishes in religious language.

3. Effective Prayer Reflects A Heart That Is Right With God

Let us look more closely into this prayer of Hezekiah. *“Remember now, O LORD, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart, and have done what was good in Your sight.”* That is the whole prayer.

That could be bad. Do you remember the prayer of the Pharisee who reminded God how good he was, and asked for nothing? Could this be in the same class? Certainly not because Jesus tells us that the Pharisee was not right with God.

But our chapter goes on to describe God's approval of Hezekiah's prayer. Isaiah had gone only a few steps from the bedside of the king, when the Word of God came to him, *“I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD. ⁶ “And I will add to your days fifteen years. I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake, and for the sake of My servant David.”¹*

Therefore that prayer of Hezekiah is not the prayer of a Pharisee. What God saw in his prayer was not only the words about his true behaviour and perfect heart; but God saw his tears. What have the tears to do with an effective prayer? Why do they remove that prayer from the class of the Pharisee?

The Second Book of Kings tells us that Hezekiah's statement was true. We read in 2 Kings 18:3, *³ And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD,*

according to all that his father David had done. Hezekiah broke up the worship of idols, into which Israel had fallen.

Then we read in 2 Kings 18:5-7 concerning King Hezekiah, ⁵ *He trusted in the LORD God of Israel, so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor who were before him.* ⁶ *For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses.* ⁷ *The LORD was with him; he prospered wherever he went.*

Where did Hezekiah get this power to live according to the will of God? In his prayer he said what the fountain was. It was a heart that had been made right. And when he thinks of that, he has to weep. He does not think of it with pride and complacency and self-satisfaction. But he looks at his own life and heart with utter humility, the way a beggar might look at a shining light or a precious jewel or a bounteous meal which someone else had brought into his shelter.

We know how that could be true of Hezekiah. We have the whole story before us. For Hezekiah lived in the days of Isaiah the Prophet, and Isaiah was at his very side when he prayed.

When we read the book of the Prophet we see the things that had entered into Hezekiah's heart and had changed it from evil and fear, to truth and peace. Hezekiah had heard this message from Isaiah as we read in Isaiah 35:3-10, ³ *Strengthen the weak hands, And make firm the feeble knees.* ⁴ *Say to those who are fearful-hearted, "Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, With the recompense of God; He will come and save you."* ⁵ *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.* ⁶ *Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, And streams in the desert.* ⁷ *The parched ground shall become a pool, And the thirsty land springs of water; In the habitation of jackals, where each lay, There shall be grass with reeds and rushes.*

⁸ *A highway shall be there, and a road, And it shall be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, But it shall be for others. Whoever walks the road, although a fool, Shall not go astray.* ⁹ *No lion shall be there, Nor shall any ravenous beast go up on it; It shall not be found there.*

But the redeemed shall walk there, ¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, And come to Zion with singing, With everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, And sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

That is it! Do you hear that word “*redeemed?*” Hezekiah knew how God could change the man who is weak and sinful to one who belongs to God Himself and in whom God lives. After he recovered, Hezekiah wrote a little psalm about his thinking in this prayer:

We read in Isaiah 38:14-17, ¹⁴ Like a crane or a swallow, so I chattered; I mourned like a dove; My eyes fail from looking upward. O LORD, I am oppressed; Undertake for me!

¹⁵ “What shall I say? He has both spoken to me, And He Himself has done it. I shall walk carefully all my years In the bitterness of my soul. ¹⁶ O LORD, by these things men live; And in all these things is the life of my spirit; So You will restore me and make me live. ¹⁷ Indeed it was for my own peace That I had great bitterness; But You have lovingly delivered my soul from the pit of corruption, For You have cast all my sins behind Your back.

Do you see! That was the whole prayer! Hezekiah prayed to God in need; but he prayed mindful of the fact that his very prayer, his very hold on God was the work of God Himself. For God had forgiven his sins and made him His own. Now he could pray, but now he also had the answer to every prayer.

We, from our point of view, should be able to see even more clearly what it means to pray with a heart that is right with God. Isaiah had told King Hezekiah that God would redeem His people from their sins, and thus they could count on God for forgiveness and for life itself. We can look back and see the fact accomplished.

The Redeemer whom Isaiah foresaw and foretold has walked among us, and we have seen His glory. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, took upon Himself all the burden of God’s wrath for sin and thus cleared the way for God’s very life again in our souls. Because of the perfect redemption of Jesus Christ on the Cross we can be so sure that God is our Father, that our every thought of God is a conversation with God.

Through the story of Jesus' work, and through the washing of Baptism in His name, the old heart is cast out, and a new can take its place that is sure of God's love and that is rich with the life of God's presence. Hence the desires and interests of that heart, the plans and projects of that heart, are as God would have them to be.

Hence our Saviour could tell His disciples in the Upper Room, in John 15:7, ***7 "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.***

In today's Gospel, in that same discourse, the Saviour says, in John 16:23, 26-27, ***Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. ... 26 "In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; 27 "for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God.***

When we trust for sure that Jesus Christ redeemed us from sin and made us God's own children, then that Spirit of God and of Christ works in us the heart which wills God's will and wants God's wants and moves with God's emotions and seeks God's plans.

In all of this, of course, we must remember one earnest fact. We have to look for it in Hezekiah's comment on his prayer, ***"You have cast all my sins behind Your back."***² This new heart is never perfect. There is no time at which we can say, ***"Automatically my heart is going to be in accord with God's."*** But the law of sin still works within us. The old flesh still hangs on. There come the tears.

There is our problem, as we look out at life with its pains and uncertainties. We ask, What does God really want? How can I know His will? That sin, that waywardness of heart, always drives us back to God in humbleness and weakness; and then more earnestly we know God in joy and the forgiveness of our sins, the more deeply we realise our need for forgiveness and the more steadfastly clutch at His saving hand.

Hence the prayer of the Christian person has always one great purpose, ***"God, forgive my sin. God, work in me, despite my sin, more completely and truly. God, take my imperfect heart, and for Jesus' sake make it perfect to do Your will."*** And isn't that exactly how our Saviour taught us to pray?

He did not give us a list of things to pray for. But He asked us to bend our hearts and desires to this, that we might more completely harbour the life and power of God within us, that we might more steadily desire to do the will of God, that daily we might go to God for every need of that day; that every day we might reach out to Him for the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus.

4. Effective Prayer Leaves The Solving Of Our Problems To God

Hezekiah did not ask God to make him well. He left that problem to God. We said that we can hardly accuse Hezekiah of thinking of it even when he did not say it, "*God, please make me well.*" That is the way of great prayer and effective prayer. You will notice that we sometimes grade prayers in the very opposite way.

Little Christians sometimes think, "*The prayer of the great Christian succeeds because he is so very sure what he wants; mine fails because I leave it to God or don't hang on until I get it.*" You notice that the very opposite is the case. The great prayer is great because its faith is great. And "*faith*" is another way of saying "*the will to trust God.*"

Please understand what we mean when we say, "*Leave it to God.*" That does not mean to dismiss the whole thing from your mind. It does not mean to try to forget that you have trouble at all. It does not mean to develop a sense of apathy about the difficulties of life.

King Hezekiah was thoroughly aware of his need, and what is more, he knew it to be not merely a matter of physical illness, but he faced his need of the forgiveness of his sins. But effective prayer puts the solution of the need into God's hand. That is never a matter of apathy or unconcern. That never means to say to God, "*I'll forget all about it, You take over.*" Rather it means to hang on to God with every strength of mind and heart. It means to recruit every drop of spiritual vitality for the task of trusting God's power and God's plan. every step of the way.

Hence our Saviour was so emphatic that true prayer must also be persistent. For faith persists. When a man trusts that God is his Father for Jesus' sake, that trust holds on. This vigour of faith always finds two things working side by side. The believing Christian is sure that God is very great and very powerful and through Jesus very loving.

But he is also sure that he himself is very small and very much in need of God. Hence the praying Christian in his every prayer really has only one great problem, *The problem of being sure of God.*

Jesus told His disciples that God has one answer to every true prayer, His own Spirit. So, when we say *“Leave it to God,”* we are not relaxing our muscles or mumbling between our lips. Rather we are arriving at a peak of intense conviction; we are breaking through to a climax of sure trust, we are shouting, and we are singing. We see God at work and we are sure of His plan and purpose.

5. Effective Prayer Understands the Answers to Prayer

King Hezekiah’s prayer had some astonishing results. God healed him, through a poultice which Isaiah put on his boil. God granted Hezekiah a special sign, which we remember in the story of the shadow on the sundial. What shall we make of this? That if we get the right note into our prayers, we can also stave off dying? Certainly not!

But many people would like to think of prayer that way. They are willing to dabble in religious truths which they do not understand, and say words which make no sense to them, if they can hope for the chance that they will get what they are after.

The final fact that we want to learn today about prayer is that effective prayer goes on praying through the answer to prayer. I don’t mean merely that it says *“Thank you.”* But just as prayer in need asks for the insight into God’s will, so prayer continues to ponder the way and plan of God when the need is gone.

In other words, prayer is not merely that a child says to its father *“Give me what I want,”* but prayer is the child talking to its father about everything and, when the tongue is tired, is simply holding on to the father’s hand.

God told Isaiah to tell the king, ⁶ ***“And I will add to your days fifteen years. I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake, and for the sake of My servant David.”*** When all that came to pass, Hezekiah did not quit thinking about God and about his own need.

But he sang to God as written in Isaiah 38:18-20, ¹⁸ *For Sheol [the grave] cannot thank You, Death cannot praise You; Those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your truth.* ¹⁹ *The living, the living man, he shall praise You, As I do this day; The father shall make known Your truth to the children.* ²⁰ *“The LORD was ready to save me; Therefore we will sing my songs with stringed instruments All the days of our life, in the house of the LORD.”*

Do you see what happened? This heart, that was the source of Hezekiah’s prayer, continued to house the Lord God. Hezekiah had learned more about God through this whole event. But most important he had learned God’s use of himself. He saw, better than ever, where he fitted into the scheme of God. He was happy to be alive. But his happiness lay not in just being alive, but his happiness lay in a life that carried out God’s purpose of life in this world, namely, to glorify God. That is the effectiveness of true prayer.

To pray in need and have the need answered and say “*Thank You*” to God, but then going on doing things that are wrong in God’s sight is not true prayer. It is then a no more than dressing up satisfactions with food and drink and pious language.

True prayer comes into its own when it has sought out the plan of God and has held to God for Jesus’ sake and then puts the praying man more completely than ever into the business of carrying out God’s will. God’s will for us is always that we should represent Him to our world and our surroundings.

King Hezekiah is one of the few men in history who had a timetable, in which God told him how long he would carry out that purpose down here on earth and when he would continue the program in eternity.

The rest of us have to get along without a timetable. That does not make the task less interesting or our prayers less vigorous. With St. Paul we can say, and we can pray over it, as we read in Philippians 1:20-21, *with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.* ²¹ *For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

Finally, this is summed up in 2 Corinthians 5:9, ⁹ *Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to [God].* The essence of our prayer is not to get a timetable. The purpose of our prayer is to have the fuel

for the whole journey and the joy in living, here and there, as a person who lives indeed.

Prayer is an awesome thing. We talk to God!

May God's own Spirit help us, through Jesus Christ, that in our prayers we do not pinch God into the size of our own puny lives. But may He give us His grace, and may He Himself dwell in us, so that we may grow to the size of His plans and be strong with the power of His might. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ 2 Kings 20:5-6

² Isaiah 38:17