

God Keeps His Promise

200 years after Babylon overran Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon's temple, the Persians have overrun Babylon and two waves of Israelites have returned to the ruins of the city of their forefathers. They have rebuilt the temple; but life is still hard. They're vulnerable to attack and warlike tribes of Bedouins harass them daily.

A man named Nehemiah—a Jew, working as Cupbearer to the king of Persia—gets a report of the conditions of his people living there on the rubble that once was Jerusalem. He is deeply troubled and senses immediately that God is calling him—Nehemiah—to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of the city so the people of God can be secure. And so he prays this prayer:

<p>NEHEMIAH 1:8-11 (NRSV) <i>Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; ⁹but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.'</i> ¹⁰<i>They are your</i></p>	<p><i>servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. ¹¹O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!' At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.</i></p>
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Does prayer "work"? We're told that if God doesn't answer our prayers we need to be persistent and keep praying until it's answered; or we're told that if God doesn't answer our prayer it's because our faith isn't strong enough or there's sin in our life. But sometimes those cookie-cutter answers just don't seem enough.

In the first place, God is not our personal genie.

In the second place, these cookie-cutter explanations put us in control. Is God's answer to our prayers really dependent on our persistence? Or whether there is sin in our life—if there's sin in our life God won't answer our prayer; if there's no sin in our life God will answer. That makes us and the condition of our lives the determining factor in how God responds to our prayers.

The very statement that prayer "works" suggests it's a tool that we use. I believe that prayer is something infinitely more than that; and that we sell God short—and ourselves, for that matter—when we make prayer some tool we use when we need something.

Listen to this story in the Gospel of Mark:

<p>MARK 2:1-12 (NRSV) <i>When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³ Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ And when</i></p>	<p><i>they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ "Why does</i></p>
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this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”⁸ At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’?¹⁰ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—¹¹ “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.”¹² And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Take a look with me at something here: some men were asking Jesus to heal their friend. They even carried him to the roof and lowered him down on ropes to get him close to Jesus. Instead of immediately healing the sick man, Jesus said, “Your sins are forgiven.” They wanted *healing*; Jesus offered *forgiveness*!

These men were asking for something specific; but God had so much more to give them! They wanted a gift; God wanted to make them His children so they could inherit *everything—including healing*.

Makes you want to pray, “God, please disregard my last request! I’ll be glad to receive whatever you have for me!” Listen to scripture:

In the text today Nehemiah reminds God of his promise to Moses—vs. 9:

‘If you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.’

Nehemiah trusted that God would keep His promise, even when there was no evidence that the promise would be fulfilled. Popular teachings about prayer include everything from curing cancer to praying for a parking place in downtown. And, as I implied earlier, sometimes those approaches may seem like attempts to manipulate God.

But if we are going to pray in any kind of life-sustaining or life-changing way, we will begin with the understanding that before we pray, God already knows our needs and our desires, and that God’s vision and desire—and God’s promise—is that God will do for us more than we desire for ourselves.

I find a helpful metaphor in nature. Imagine a river flowing to the sea. There is power in its flow; and there is direction and movement and purpose—the water is moving to the sea.

We see a boat tied to the shore. We have several choices: we can try to row upstream, against the current; in which case we will spend much energy getting nowhere.

We can choose to use the boat to go across the river—get to the other side; in which case we’re likely to discover pretty much what we find on this side.

Or, we could turn and walk away, afraid of the current.

But, if we get in the boat and move *with* the flow of the current, we will achieve

the same goal as the power which moves the water.

Something happens when we pray that way—when we stop going against the current and trust its flow. We become aligned with the Will of God for the world—and for ourselves.

Jesus was very adept at this. He meditated until he was perfectly aligned: “The Father and I are one,” he said.

Prayer is many things, and accomplishes many ends; but, at its deepest level, is that: aligning ourselves with the Will of God and trusting that God will move us toward God’s intended purposes and goals. As such, prayer is not a manipulative or persuasive appeal nearly so much as it is a trusting surrender to God’s will.

Prayer changes things; but most of all, prayer changes us. It changes our perspectives and our goals and our desires and aligns them with a divine will that exceeds our most passionate desires and needs.

Please understand that there are both individual and corporate applications of this understanding of prayer. When I arrived here in April I found some people who were discouraged and disappointed. I heard words of grief and anger and blame.

Sometimes we forget that the church is called into existence by God. And it is that call, and not our own effort or our own preferences, that determines the church’s purpose and mission. And ultimately the life of the congregation flows from the intention of God, through the example of Jesus Christ; or it doesn’t flow at all.

But the good news is that the wholeness and fulfillment of God’s people—both as individuals and as the Church—is already assured when we seek and find and live fully within the will of God!

No cultural shifts, no ineffective leaders, shrinking budgets, failed policies—not even the gates of Hell will prevail against what Jesus began and what God calls us to continue. God will not leave himself without witness; and, like Jesus told the Jews of his time: “If you won’t do it, God will call someone who will!”

Our choice is whether to align ourselves with that calling—or to continue trying to get it done by our own effort or by the effort of a new pastor.

Can we take the next step together? Can we turn from discouragement and cynicism to hope? And we can have hope because of the Promises of God, and the witness of scripture and history that God keeps His Promises.