

Good morning. We have this silent sermon bumper, so I don't know when it's over, would you pray for me?

Have you ever asked somebody to do that, to pray for you? Who did you ask? And why did you ask that? What were you expecting? And did anything happen as a result of you asking somebody to pray for you?

Have you ever said, I will pray for you? And why did you say that? Who did you say it to? And when you pray for somebody, how many times do you pray for them? How long do you keep praying for somebody?

When do you stop? And what happened as a result of you praying for somebody? You know, we live in a time where the expression thoughts and prayers is just thrown around by everybody, and it's kind of become a cliché and it's ridiculed by some people. So I'm very careful to not use that expression. And what does it mean to say, I'll be thinking of you and praying for you?

You're in my thoughts and prayers. What does it look like? Well, today we continue our series of sermons on prayer, and today we talk about intercessory prayer. And you say intercessory prayer. What is that?

Well, I define it like this. Intercessory prayer is the act of praying for others for their needs, their concerns, their struggles. It is a selfless act of compassionate care for someone. And intercessory prayer can be for an individual, can be for a group, or it can be even for the nation. I'm reminded from time to time that people pray for me.

Tim and I both have elders that pray for us. I'm sure Tim's elder has a bigger task than mine, but I appreciate the fact that elders pray for us every day on staff. But I also find that I have other people praying for me. The other day, I was having lunch with two men who are helping me lead the men in Bloomington. And we were just talking about things, and one of them said, you know, I pray for you every morning.

I just looked at him like, oh. He said, yeah. And he told me exactly where and when he prays for me on a walk somewhere. And he told me what he prays for. He said some of it was general, you know, like my health and that sort of thing.

But then he went on to say, and this is what moved me and touched me. He said, I also pray about that situation you told me about. It's about someone that I dearly love and am deeply concerned about. And he said, I pray for him every day. Man.

That was really, really special to me. Very encouraging. God wants us to pray intercessory prayers. He wants us to pray for each other, and he promises to respond to those prayers. This is pretty amazing.

And there are examples of God responding to people's prayers. And as a result of the prayers, things change. Things change as a result. Do you ever pray for someone's health? Do you ever pray that God will heal somebody and maybe extend their lives?

And then the hard question, did he answer your prayer like he wanted? Every time? Sometimes, maybe never. There's an interesting story about a guy who was terminally ill. He would not recover.

He was going to die very soon. And it was Hezekiah, King of Judah, back in the seventh century B.C. he was told by God through the prophet Isaiah to get your house in order because you're going to die and you're going to die soon. Well, Hezekiah, as you can imagine, was devastated by the news. And the text said he was.

That he broke down and he wept bitterly. And I'm guessing that he asked other people around him to start praying, to intercede, to ask God for this not to happen. I think Hezekiah interceded for himself, asking God to extend his life. Well, so Isaiah comes and announces this death sentence to Hezekiah. Hezekiah breaks down, weeps, intercedes for himself, has other people interceding.

And Isaiah's not very far, on his way back home. And God says, turn around. I need you to go talk to Hezekiah again. And this is what the Lord says to Hezekiah. I have heard your prayer and I have seen your tears.

I will heal you. And three days from now you will get out of bed and go to the temple of the Lord. I will add 15 years to your life, and I will rescue you and this city from the king of Assyria. Now, it's interesting to me that this story is told not only in 2 Kings 20, but it's also told almost in an identical fashion in Isaiah 38. Now, Isaiah 38's account is interesting because it adds more information.

It adds a prayer of gratitude that Hezekiah has for the Lord extending his life. And it reveals the emotional roller coaster that Hezekiah was on. And then the prayer ends with these words. Think of it, think of it. The Lord is ready to heal me.

I will sing his praises with instruments every day of my life in the temple of the Lord. So God answers intercessory prayer for Hezekiah, and Hezekiah responds appropriately with gratitude. If you think about it, this is a really, really Fascinating concept that the God who is all, everything, omnipresent, omni. He has everything and is in control of everything. He says to you and me, he says, hey, I'm going to invite you to shape the future.

I'm going to ask you to help me shape the future. And so God will respond to our prayers, and he may do things differently as a result. He may extend your life 15 years. Just as parents love to hear their

children ask for things, God loves to hear us ask for things. And just as we like to respond when we can, God likes to respond to our prayers.

Now, when it comes to intercession, praying for others, just what are the boundaries? What should we pray for? According to the Bible, it's a lot. It's pretty wide open. How about this?

When Paul writes to Timothy, who's living in Ephesus in 1 Timothy 2, he says, I urge you first of all to pray for all people. That's a pretty big task. Ask God to help them, intercede on their behalf and give thanks for them. All people pray this way for kings and all who are in authority, so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. This is good and pleases God, our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.

So we are directed to pray for all people generally. But there's a specific part of that general prayer, and specifically we're to pray that everyone will come to know the truth about the saving power of Jesus Christ. That's God's desire. He wants everyone to be saved. And here's the thing.

He wants us to intercede, to pray for the ones that we know that are lost. So do we have a prayer list of people that do not know Jesus that we're interceding for? Are we interceding? And in this passage, Paul focuses a lot on people in authority, people in government. He says you should just call them every name in the book and call them idiots and do all kinds of.

That's not what he says. He says we should pray for them. And these are respectful prayers, respecting the people in offices of authority, no matter which side they come from. He says a lot about this in Romans 13. And Peter says the same thing in first Peter 2.

We're talking about the days of Nero, the emperor Nero, who hated Christians and persecuted them, killed them. And these intercessory prayers to me are kind of out there. They're kind of impersonal. Yet Paul urges us to pray for them, pray them and pray for them, regardless of who occupies the various offices of government. Pray with respect for the office.

Now there's a more personal side of intercessory prayer, a little more up close and personal. And James, the little brother of Jesus, gets at that in James, chapter five. Notice what he says about intercessory prayer. He says, are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray.

Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick and the Lord will make you well.

And if you've committed any sins, you will be forgiven. Confess your sins to each other. Pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. So prayer is not just personal and private.

Sometimes prayer, many times prayer needs to be public and communal. And I believe James is saying that praying is a lifestyle. The church. When we're struggling, we pray. When we're happy and things are going well, we pray.

When we're sick, we pray. We ask for intercessory prayer. Would you pray for me? Will you pray for me, please? Then he talks a little bit about elders and anointing oil.

And that's a little bit foreign to us, although it still happens. If you ask for an elder to come and anoint you with oil, he will, Tim will come and do it, I'll come and do it. And there's not anything too super weird about it. It's just reflecting a first century practice that has some medicinal concepts around it. But deeper than that, it goes back to the Old Testament, the idea of, of God blessing and showing his approval and favor by laying on hands and anointing with oil.

So there's a richness to that. But I think backing off from a little bit, I think what James is saying, he's simply saying that God pays attention when his people pray. It's the Lord who forgives sins, it's the Lord who heals. But here's the thing. It's in the asking, it's in the interceding that we see it happen.

It's not faith in our ability, it's faith in God's ability, God's desire and his power to heal and restore. But our prayer, it's the power. In some regards, the power is in our asking to unleash the power of God. So the prayer becomes powerful as well. Okay, I'm going to ask a really Awkward question.

What do you do? What do you think or feel when intercessory prayer doesn't seem to work? You pray for something and you're confident it's within the Lord's will for this to happen, but it doesn't happen. Maybe you're praying about someone's marriage, but it ends in divorce. Maybe you're praying about someone's salvation and they die without knowing Jesus.

Maybe you pray for the healing of a child and it doesn't happen.

I think probably all of us have experienced intercessory prayer where our desired outcome didn't come. I want to share two stories where there was lots and lots of intercessory prayer by many righteous people, but they had different outcomes. One is Chris Hatchell, who worked with my son Luke. Chris and Luke were both civil engineers

working for a firm in Nashville, Tennessee. Chris.

I got to know Chris through Luke. Chris had been a missionary in Central America for a few years, and then he led mission teams back there. He was a great man, a great triathlete, just a man of faith, beautiful family. But he died at age 40 after a long battle with abdominal cancer. And he leaves behind Dee Dee, his wife and three boys.

And I can assure you that during his battle with cancer, there were many, many righteous people praying fervently, faithfully, expectantly, boldly saying, God, heal Chris.

But he died on March 22 of last year.

A lot of you probably know Kim Allen, or some of you do. Anyway, you may not know this part. John and Kim's daughter Victoria is married to our youngest son, Ben. I'm guessing some of you have met Ben on the side of the road. He's a state trooper, and he won't tell me if he's met you.

Ben and Victoria produced this beautiful little boy called Blake Allen Burris. I'm kind of fond of him.

But Kim, in the fall of 2021, got Covid. And I mean, she got it really, really badly. And she was rushed to the ER in Bedford and she couldn't breathe. They immediately lifelined her to Methodist. Honestly, I didn't think she was going to make it, but she made it to Methodist, and there she began months of being in the hospital, months of intercessory prayer, prayer vigils, all kinds of things.

And I don't know how many times Victoria told us doctors met with her and John and said, it doesn't look good. One doctor said, she has a less than 1% chance of survival. You need to change the way you're thinking. Victoria said, no no. So intercessory prayers continued.

And after a lot of, if you will, softening those intercessory prayers, God healed her. She's doing great. She's alive and well and living. Living well. It was a miracle.

So the question is, why Kim and not Chris? Why not both of them? And these are questions that I find difficult. And they sometimes cause people to pray, not to pray, because why pray? God's going to do what he wants.

Yeah, maybe. Or worse yet, these kinds of things cause people to lose their faith. And so how do we process things like this? I turn back to the Bible because there are examples of unanswered intercessory prayer. And while there's a lot of mystery in this, to me, lots and lots of mystery.

Listen to this. There is a deep invitation for a deeper faith. Think of Paul's thorn in the flesh in Second Corinthians 12. We don't know what it is. Maybe it was his eyesight.

That's kind of what I think it is. But whatever it was, it was something Paul felt like he needed to get rid of because it was hindering him and his work. And so he goes to the Lord, and three times he says, God, Lord, take this away from me. Three times the Lord says, no, no, no. And then the Lord says, my grace is sufficient for you.

And then he adds. The Lord adds, my power is made perfect in weakness. Your weakness. My power is made perfect in your weakness. And Paul seems to understand it.

He accepts it, and he moves forward, I think, with a deeper faith that's helpful to all of us. And then there's a story in Matthew 11. It's also found in Luke 7 about John the Baptist. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, the cousin of Jesus, I believe, who prepares the way for Jesus, does all this stuff. And now he is in prison because he's confronted Herod with the truth.

Herod doesn't like it, so he throws John in prison. And John's been there a while, and his expectations of justice and judgment that have come from a lot of intercessory prayer haven't happened. There's no justice because John's still in prison. There's no judgment because Herod's still living the life.

So John, after all this intercessory prayer, is now in the dungeon of doubt. And so he gets some of his guys and says, go ask Jesus a question. It's more of an accusation.

Go to Jesus and say, are you the Messiah, or should we expect someone else? In other words, John is saying, hey, you're not doing your job. Are you really who you say you are? If you are who you say you are, you would have me out of here and Herod would be hurting in some way or another.

Why am I still in here now? I like to imagine that Jesus receives the question from John peacefully and compassionately. Can I tell you, the answer Jesus gives to me is not that satisfactory, but it is revealing because Jesus is saying, here's an opportunity for you to grow in your faith. Because he says, go back in Matthew 11, go back to John and tell him what you have heard and seen. The blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the good news is being preached to the poor.

But also tell him this and make sure he hears this. God blesses those who do not fall away because of me. These words of Jesus challenge us

to trust him, even when we don't fully understand his plan. I like to think that John heard the words slightly smiled as he realized the mystery of the kingdom of God is much more than about our significant yet temporary lives here. Everything will be made new.

Everything will be made right in eternity. And listen to this. Faith means that we embrace God's ways even when they seem counterintuitive. The essence of faith is trusting God with unanswered questions. And so I would like to think that John doubted his doubts more than he doubted his faith.

So where does that leave us with intercessory prayer? I find it to be a profound mystery. It's an invitation from God to participate in his work, even when the outcomes are uncertain. We see throughout Scripture that God listens, he responds, and sometimes changes circumstances because of prayer. Yet he doesn't always answer in the way we expect or hope.

So where does that leave us? And this was a moment for me this last week.

Where does it leave us? It leaves us. When you think about it, it leaves us right where it all starts and ends with God.

Faith. It leaves us in a place of faith, the essence of which is trust. And then perseverance. We just keep moving. We keep moving.

These things are the essence of a relationship with God. Faith, trust, perseverance. So we keep praying because God calls us to pray. We intercede because we believe in his power, his goodness, his ability, his sovereignty. We trust that his response to our prayer, whether it is what we want or expect, is something that he will use for his purposes.

Purposes that are far beyond our understanding at times. So let's commit to intercessory prayer not just in words, but in faith. And maybe a good general place to start is reminding ourselves of the words of 2nd Chronicles 7, Solomon's dedicated the Temple. You ought to read that. It's just amazing.

And later in the night, he receives these words from the Lord. If my people who are called by My name will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear them from heaven and I will forgive their sin and heal their land. That's a good general description of intercessory prayer, praying for all people, as Paul talked about in First Timothy 2. But I want to leave us a little more personal and specific, and then Tim is going to come and share something in just a minute or two after communion.

But I want to ask you, who in your world is hurting right now?

Just quietly name them to yourself.

Say a prayer for them right now, Pray for them later and let them know. Let them know you prayed for them. The second question probably related in some ways. Who in your world is lost? Who in your world does not know Jesus?

Think about them. Pray for them right now and later, and then somehow engage them this week. You don't have to tell them, hey, I pray that you'll get saved. You don't have to say that. Just.

Just engage them somehow this week. Let them know you love them. My hope is that you'll join me in thinking about intercessory prayer all the way from the government to the most vulnerable and closest people to you. And may we, like Hezekiah, like Paul, and even John the Baptist, trust, trust in God's wisdom, rest in his presence, and continue to pray boldly, knowing that our prayers are not in vain. Listen to this.

Sometimes our prayers may not change the things we desire, but such prayers can change us. As we hear Jesus say, my grace is sufficient for you. It's enough. Jesus prays an intercessory prayer in John 17. It's about our unity.

It's about our protection, it's about our joy and our growth in becoming more like him as we engage his teaching. But here's the thing that kind of intrigues me. Jesus still intercedes for us even this morning. The Hebrew preacher in Hebrews 7 says, Therefore he's able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because he always lives to intercede for them. So as we think about taking communion here in a moment, I want to remind you that Jesus is really here.

He's present. He is for you, not against you. He knows you better than you know yourself. He's for me. He knows me.

And as we commune with Him, I want to thank him for his intercession. Now, his intercession now is a little bit different than ours because his intercession is with his blood that continually cleanses us. He's our advocate, our Savior, but He wants us to intercede for others. So as we commune and we take the bread and we take the juice and we think about the body and the blood of Jesus and just what it all means, may we thank him for giving us life and then think about what that means and what our responsibility is in interceding for other people. Let me pray.

Father, we thank you for your word about intercession. I confess it's confusing at times, but I trust you and I know all of us have had experiences this week. I prayed for somebody on Thursday to be healed and they died this morning. And I've heard other stories of people

dying this last week that were prayed for. And yet there are other people around us that have lived and had lives extended and things have changed in a positive way.

It's just a mystery. But help us to always pray and never give up trusting you and the long view of life that reaches throughout eternity. So give us a stronger faith, Lord. We're like the man who said, I believe. Help me in my unbelief.

So as we commune this morning, it takes us right back to the heart and the center of what we need to know. And that is that you love us and that you sent Jesus to die for us on a Sunday morning. He came back to life to show us that there is a plan far beyond this world that is much better. And we embrace that today. It's in Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

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