



**Relenting Wrath**  
**Exodus 32-33      David Platt**  
**Together for the Gospel Conference 2014**

If you have a Bible—and I hope you do—let me invite you to open with me to Exodus 32. In light of what we already heard earlier, I am so overwhelmed right now by this word and the realities I am about to preach:

- Relenting wrath—the wrath of God
- The role of desperate prayer in our lives, families and churches
- And the mystery of divine providence in the universe

I am not adequate for this task. I feel the need to pray from the start, but even in that I know I have this tendency when praying in public—especially at the beginning of a sermon like this—to bow my head and say some words that seem to set up my sermon well. I even have this sin-sick tendency in a setting like this to try to pray in a way that will impress you.

At the same time, when we bow our heads to pray in a room this size, I think many of us have a tendency to just let our minds begin to wander. Within seconds of me starting to pray, hundreds—even thousands—of us will begin thinking about other things: details of our day, things we need to do, calls we need to make, messages we need to check, where we're going to eat and a myriad of thoughts around this room.

If we're not careful, there can be this perfunctory prayer exercise going on in this place while all of Heaven is shouting, "Do you realize to Whom you're talking? Do you realize what you're doing? You're talking to God—7,000 of you at one time—and He is listening. Sure, at the same time He's upholding Mars and trillions of other stars that He knows by name and sustaining every, single organ of 7.2 billion people on the planet, but you have God's attention in this place."

Don't let your mind wander nor treat prayer like it's perfunctory. It's not. It's powerful. Could we bow our heads and together, still our minds and contemplate the wonder, beauty, glory and majesty of the One to Whom we are praying?

Oh God, we need You. In the silence of this room, our hearts are beating only because You're giving them rhythm. You're the only reason any of us are alive right now. You're the only reason that every one of us is not in hell right now. You are our Savior, Creator, Sustainer, King, Lord and God. We are saying together right now, we want to hear from You. We want Your presence to rest in a powerful way in this place. God, we pray for that. We pray that You would do something by Your Word and power in the next few minutes for which only You can get glory. We want to know You more. *"Let him who boasts boast in this, that he knows and understands Me."* This is our desire. We want to know You more. We want to know Your wrath, love, justice, grace, goodness and glory. We want to know more about Who You are. We want to know how these attributes of Yours apply to our lives, and particularly the way we pray in our lives, families and churches—and as the church. We ask these things, Lord Jesus, in Your name that the Father may be glorified in this room. Amen.

"Prayer is a huge hole in the canvas of the reformed resurgence and most other forms of Christianity today." These were the words of John Piper in a recent conversation concerning trends in the church landscape. By God's grace, you and I have witnessed a revival of theology that views God as absolutely sovereign, man as utterly sinful and the gospel as supremely glorious. By God's grace, we have seen a renewed interest in ecclesiology in the marks of the church that matter most to God. By God's grace, we are watching the way that this theology and ecclesiology fuel and form missiology and zeal for God's glory, propel church planters into cities and missionaries to move overseas, have led to a plethora of blogs and books written, conferences held and conversations had about theology, ecclesiology and missiology. All these things attest to the prevalence of these trends, yet in the midst of it all, something glaring is missing, brothers and sisters. "A huge hole" in Piper's words. That hole is prayer.

D.A. Carson similarly laments the sheer prayerless that characterizes so much of the western church. Where are the plethora of books written, blogs posted, conversations had and conferences held on prayer and fasting in our day?

We look back at the days of the Westminster Assembly where brothers gathered like this—but not just for preaching. They gathered to pray. They would preach for an hour and then pray for an hour. They would pray for two hours and then preach for two hours. That is a concept that is totally foreign among us today.

Amid a right emphasis on the preaching of God's Word, where is the equally-right emphasis on praying as God's people? In the words of Kevin DeYoung in that masterful sermon, "We have nothing but the Word of God and prayer." Why is it then, that you and I—I include myself in this—spend hours every week in the church devoted to the ministry of the Word while we spend minutes every week in the church devoted to the ministry of prayer?

If we look at mighty movements of God from biblical to contemporary history, from Nehemiah to the New Testament church, from 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritans to 19<sup>th</sup> century laymen and students, we will see a steady stream of men and women who were known for their passionate panting after God. They were known for their desperate desire to love Him and belong to Him; to experience power with Him from the confines of the prayer closet to the corners of planet Earth. I fear this is not what we are known for in our day.

Today, we are known for our preaching, teaching, writing, blogging, organizing, strategizing, planning and planting but we are not known for our praying and fasting. In this, we are in profound danger of missing the whole point.

God wills for us to be a praying people. God wills to work in the world in ways that echo the cries of His children. Another way to put that is God brings about remarkable change in the world in response to the prayers of His people. Just to be clear, one more way to put that is our prayers affect the way God acts in the world.

I know as soon as I say that I make many of us uncomfortable. “Our prayers affect the way God acts in the world? Am I sure about that? What about God’s sovereignty and providence? Can your and my prayers really affect what God has already predestined to occur?” The very question that causes us to wonder how much prayer can really accomplish shows us that we have a defective understanding of divine providence.

My aim in the next few moments is to show us in the Word of God **how a right doctrine of providence results in relentless devotion to prayer**. I would even add: a relentless confidence in prayer and a relentless power through prayer. In order to show us this, I want to read one of the most biblically baffling, practically provoking stories in all the Scripture starting in Exodus 32.

After God had miraculously delivered His people out of slavery in Egypt, He leads them to Mount Sinai. He reveals His glory to them and gives them His laws. Moses goes up on the mountain to meet with God while the people wait at the foot of the mountain. As the people’s representative stands at the top of the mountain on their behalf, this is what happens:

*<sup>1</sup> When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” <sup>2</sup> So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” <sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron*

*made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." <sup>6</sup> And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.*

*<sup>7</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. <sup>8</sup> They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" <sup>9</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."*

*<sup>11</sup> But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. <sup>13</sup> Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" <sup>14</sup> And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people (Exodus 32:1-14).*

We'll stop at verse 14 for now and, in a moment, we'll pick up at the end of this chapter and then move into to chapter 33. What I want to do in this text is to show us what Moses knows and how he prays in order to help us see how what we know about God in this room should affect how we pray to God in our lives, families and churches.

We'll start with four things—four truths—about what Moses knows.

### **First, Moses knows that the perfections of God are unchanging.**

When I use the word "perfections" here, I'm referring to the perfect attributes of God that permeate His entire being and never change.

God is perfectly holy: "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord*" (Isaiah 6:3). He is without error and without equal, and that will never, ever change.

God is perfectly loving: "*God is love*" (1 John 4:16). God not only demonstrates love, He defines it.

God is perfectly just: "*A faithful God Who does no wrong, upright and just is He*" (Deuteronomy 32:4, NIV).

Ponder the paradoxical perfections of God. He is perfectly transcendent and perfectly imminent at the same time. He's perfectly full of wrath and perfectly full of love at the same time. He is perfectly

self-existent and perfectly self-sufficient. He is perfectly omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent all at the same time.

In all of these attributes, He says in Malachi 3:6, *“For I the LORD do not change.”*

*“He does not change like shifting shadows,”* James 1:17 (NIV).

*“(He) is the same yesterday, today and forever;”* Hebrews 13:8 (NIV).

Brothers and sisters, Psalm 90:2 is true: *“From everlasting to everlasting, (God is) God.”*

We know the perfections of God are unchanging. Moses knew this. Listen to his prayer in the start of verse 11. He says, *“O LORD...”* He calls on the covenant name of God which represents God’s constant revelation of Himself starting in Exodus 3. Moses goes on to acknowledge God’s wrath while appealing to God’s love. He acknowledges God’s might while appealing to God’s mercy. He acknowledges God’s glory while pleading for God’s goodness. Moses’ prayer is plainly grounded in the unchanging perfections of God.

We know this in this room. We know that God does not change and we know that is a very good thing. For if God could change, it would mean He could change either for the better or the worse, neither of which would be good. If God could change for the worse, we would have no foundation for our faith and would have a faint hope on which to hold. But if God could change for the better, that would mean He wasn’t the best possible being in the first place. How could we be sure then He’s the best possible being now?

Mark it down: God is not malleable, open, progressive, gradually learning or suddenly growing. Matthew 5:48: *“(Our) heavenly Father is perfect”* (NIV). Period.

May God help us to know the perfections of God are unchanging.

## **Secondly, Moses knows the purposes of God are unchanging.**

In verse 12, Moses appeals to the purpose of God. *“You brought Your people out of Egypt for Your praise among the Egyptians. Your purpose is not to kill them but rather to save them for Your name’s sake among the nations. That purpose,”* Moses pleads, *“has not changed.”* Moses is relaying in prayer truth that reverberates throughout God’s Word.

Psalm 33:11 says, *“But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations”* (NIV).

In Isaiah 46:10-11, God says, *“My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please’... What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that I will do”* (NIV).

Moses knows that the aims of God do not undergo amendment or adjustment because the aims of God are always achieved. Moses knows—may God help us never to forget—that God governs every single detail on the globe for the glory of His name. His purposes are unchanging.

### **Thirdly, Moses knows the promises of God are unchanging.**

What shockingly bold language in verse 13 as Moses says, “Remember” to God. He says “remember” to the omniscient God Who knows and ordains all things and knows all things He has ordained at all times. Moses has the appalling audacity to say to God, “Maybe You need to remember something. Did You forget Abraham? Isaac? Israel?” Moses points to the patriarchs and he says, “You promised them You would give them and their family the land to which You are now leading them. You cannot go back on Your Word.”

Moses knows Numbers 23:19: “*God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?*” (NIV).

Moses knows what the Psalmist will later say in Psalm 33:4: “*For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.*”

God Himself says in Psalm 89:34, “*I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered*” (NIV). Praise God for this reality and that His promises to us are not pathetic. Praise God that His promise of forgiveness in our lives is not feeble and His promise of unending life in Him is not in doubt because of unforeseen limits in Him.

Praise God that though all: “*Heaven and earth will pass away, (His) words will not pass away*” (Matthew 24:35).

Moses knows—may we know—that the promises of God are unchanging. Isn’t it interesting, brothers and sisters, that the very passage in the Old Testament that sparks the most discussion about what changes in God, Moses uses to base his entire prayer on that which never changes in God?

That brings us to verse 14 where the Bible tells us: “*And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.*” How are we to understand? Amidst all that is unchanging in God, it certainly seems that something changed here.

Just four verses before this, God said to Moses in verse ten, “*Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.*”

And now God relents. He “relented” which is a word translated in some Bibles as He “repented” and in others as He “changed His mind.” It’s the same word used in other places in Scripture to describe how people change their minds. It’s the same word used in some places in Scripture, like in Numbers 23, to describe how God doesn’t change His mind.

Listen to 1 Samuel 15:29: “*He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.*”

What is going on here?

The perfections of God are unchanging. The purposes of God are unchanging. The promises of God are unchanging. Yet...

### **The fourth truth that Moses knows is the plan of God is unfolding.**

Follow with me here: by separating the plan of God off like this, I'm not implying that God's plan is changing. We've already covered that when we think about God's perfections, purposes and promises. God is perfectly sovereign. His purposes are fixed. He's faithful to all His promises. He does all that He pleases.

This is obviously important for if God's plan is not fixed, then God's plan is apparently out of control. This is what a variety of popular and practical theologies would claim today. "God is not sure what is going to happen next in history. He is responding to the wants and whims of man and ultimately doesn't know what He is doing." Brothers and sisters, this is heresy. God does know what He is going. God is ordaining all that's happening.

When we come to Exodus 32, we must realize that God is not surprised by what's taking place here. God is not surprised when His people sin nor when Moses prays. God's will is as settled here as it is anywhere else in Scripture, but we have this story for a reason. This story shows us the unfolding plan of God and powerfully portrays how God judges men in their sin. The people of Israel sin grievously against God. God says, "They've turned away. They're stiff-necked. They are worthy of destruction and death." That's true.

Remember, this is the unchanging character of God. He is holy and He will judge men in their sin. Sin is an infinite offense in His sight and demands His swift, white-hot wrath. In verses nine and ten, we see God judges men in their sin, but then, God provides a mediator for sinners. This is the whole picture that Exodus has given us up to this point. Moses is the covenant mediator who goes back and forth between God and His people—the one who stands before the people on God's behalf and stands before God on the people's behalf. God set it up that way.

When we get to Exodus 32:7—look back at the text—God says to Moses after they sin, "Go down to your people." Think about it. If God was going to destroy the Israelites on the spot, why did he send Moses down? The answer is that God was planning to spare His people through Moses' mediation.

The reality of Exodus 32 is crystal clear. God will demonstrate His wrath against the people of Israel, unless a man steps in and mediates on their behalf.

All of this squares with the unchanging perfections of God. God is holy and will punish sin. At the same time, He is loving, merciful and will be true to His covenantal promise to save this contemptible people. How does He do it? How is God true to His unchanging perfections and unchanging promises

while fulfilling His unchanging purposes? He does it through an unfolding plan. He appoints a mediator to stand in the gap for sinners.

Isn't it ironic, at the beginning of this chapter, the people virtually disown the only one who can stand before God on their behalf? Yet, in the middle of the chapter, we see him doing exactly that—interceding for them. In so doing Moses is not changing the plan God had offered. He is fulfilling the plan that God had ordained.

This unfolding plan of God is not unfamiliar to us in Scripture. We think of Jonah whom God sent to Nineveh to proclaim this Word, “Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” Nineveh was going to be destroyed in 40 days because of their sin. That's what God had said, and at the same time God sent His prophet to tell them that. Why would God do that? It's the same picture we are seeing here. God was judging the Ninevites in their sin, and at the same time He was sending a preacher to warn them.

After spending a few days in digestive system of a fish, Jonah does, in fact, warn them. Jonah 3:10 says, *“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”* It's the same picture: God judges sin and provides a mediator through whom He displays mercy.

We don't look ultimately to Jonah to understand this unfolding plan of God. Do we? Brothers and sisters, we look to Jesus. This is the gospel. In our sin, you and I stand under the judgment of a holy God Who is compelled by the perfection of His character to condemn and destroy us. Death is not a hypothetical possibility for us. It is a sure and certain penalty—a concrete reality—for you and me in our sin. But praise be to God! He has provided a Mediator.

It's ironic, isn't it? The very One we despise is the only One Who can stand before God on our behalf. God says to Him, “Go down, Jesus, because Your people have become corrupt and turned away to all sorts of idolatry and immorality. Unless You intercede for them, they will surely be destroyed by My wrath.” Jesus comes down and stands in the gap as a Substitute for sinners, and because of His sacrifice, God relents His wrath from you and me. Hallelujah!

I am eternally grateful for the unfolding plan of God. This God—unchanging in His perfect justice and grace—purposed from eternity past to save me from my sin for His name's sake. He promised to raise me up to new life with Him and did it all through the mediation of His Son on my behalf.

God's perfections, purposes and promises are unchanging, yet His plan is ever unfolding. Under His providence and in His perfect plan, it makes sense for God in His mercy to say, “Man's sin warrants my wrath, yet I will raise up a man to mediate on their behalf and I will relent.”

In all of this, **we see how what Moses knows determines the way Moses prays.** See how Moses' doctrine of providence drives him to pray. He knows God is in control of all things and he knows



that doesn't make prayer meaningless. Instead, Moses knows God has ordained prayer as a means by which he can and must participate in God's plan. He knows God has purposes and believes God is going to use his prayers to accomplish those purposes. Do we see what's going on here?

God, in His providence, has chosen to make prayer a powerful means by which we interact with Him and effectively shape the course of history. That is not an overstatement. That statement booms across the pages of the Bible. People pray and fire falls from Heaven, the lame walk, the hungry are fed and the dead come to life.

Look at the story of the church in Acts. Every major move of God in that book comes about in the response to the prayers of God's people. They're gathered together devoted in prayer in chapter one. Then in chapter two, the Spirit of God pours out on them like flames of fire and more than 3,000 people are saved. In chapter three, Peter and John go up to the temple at the time of prayer. By the beginning of chapter four, many believed who had heard the Word and that number rose to about 5,000. It says in the beginning of chapter six that they devoted themselves to prayer. A few verses later, it says the disciples were multiplying greatly in Jerusalem. At the end of chapter seven, Stephen looks to Heaven and prays. Right after that, in chapter eight, we see the church scatter, preaching the gospel wherever they went. In chapter nine, Paul is saved and connects with Ananias—all within the context of prayer. We find the same thing in chapter ten when Peter and Cornelius are praying and the doors open for the spread of the gospel to the nations. Peter is in jail in chapter 12, and while the church is praying, an angel pokes him on the side and leads him outside. In chapter 13, the church leaders are worshipping, fasting and praying, and the Spirit says, "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them*" and a missionary movement begins that turns the Roman empire upside-down. Paul and Silas are praying in prison in chapter 16 when God brings an earthquake and a jailor and his family are saved. Yes!

I'll say it again. God, in His providence, has not called us in prayer to watch history but rather to shape history for the glory of His great name.

I know that some—maybe many—are still uncomfortable with that kind of language. Let's be clear about what we're not saying. We're not saying God is an impotent King waiting on His throne for somebody to say something to Him so He can start working in the world. That's not what we're seeing in this text.

**We see a God Who wills to work through willing intercessors.** We are saying that when we pray, God responds. When we pray, we take our God-given place and use our God-ordained privilege to participate with Him in the accomplishment of His purposes on the planet. May God help us to see.

Moses prayed and it had a big effect. When we pray, it has an effect. How does Moses pray? How does his doctrine of providence lead him to pray? How must our doctrine of providence lead us to pray? There are three ways Moses prays.

### **First, he pleads for God’s mercy upon sinners.**

“God, save them. Don’t destroy them.” Notice the basis for Moses’ prayer. He doesn’t say, “They don’t deserve Your wrath.” Moses sees the severity of their sin. He knows God’s wrath is exactly what they warrant. Instead of some inherent goodness in man, he appeals to the intrinsic glory of God. “Save them, O God, for Your name’s sake. Show Your majesty by showering them with mercy.”

Later on in the chapter, picking up in verse 31, Moses’ intercession intensifies. The Bible says in Exodus 32:31-32, “*So Moses returned to the LORD and said, ‘Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.’*” What a prayer!

It’s a prayer just like we see Paul pray in Romans 9 that he would be accursed and cut off for the sake of his people. Moses and Paul both know, based upon the purposes and promises of God, that is not possible. This is part of what I mean when I say, the role of desperate prayer and the mystery of divine providence. There is a desperation and even an exasperation here. It says, “God, do whatever it takes—take my own life if necessary—but glorify Yourself in the salvation of these souls.”

Brothers and sisters, is this the way we pray? Do we plead like this for the salvation of souls around us in North America and the nations?

I got back a few weeks ago from Nepal where a few of our pastors and I took off for Katmandu in a helicopter and went up near the border of the Tibetan Himalayan mountains—basically about as high as one can get and still maintain a consistent life. We landed there in a village and spent the next six days hiking out about 90 miles through these villages. These villages gave definition to urgent physical and spiritual need.

A study was done about ten years ago in the villages that we were in and they found that approximately half of the children there were dying before their eighth birthday. One mom had 14 kids and only two made it to adulthood. They are dying of things like diarrhea that can be simply cured by taking a pill. In one village, there was a cholera outbreak—an infection of the small intestine that causes diarrhea—and, in a matter of a couple of weeks, there were 60 people dead.

When we were preparing to go into these villages, we were hiking with packs with very few supplies. The people with whom we were partnering in gospel ministry had told us that when we get into these villages, there would be kids running up to us and wanting to reach into our bags. They just want

something—anything. We were working in long-term ways to address the needs there and were told the best way to respond was to keep our bags closed and not to pull out of the bag the one bar left because there would be a hundred more people coming around.

We were walking into the beginning of this one village and a couple of little girls came up to us. One little girl was reaching and clawing into my bag. Smiling, I played with her. She ended up grabbing onto my hand so, we held hands as we walked through the village. With her looking up at me, I held this precious, little girl's hand. When we got near the end of the village and were about to go on—she had to stay there, obviously—she started reaching up again to grab something. I was turning my bag away while she was tightly holding on to my hand. There came a point where I had to yank my hand away from her and she looked straight into my eyes with this desperate, angry look and tried to spit on me. She wasn't able to and it ended up going all over herself. We went through village after village after village like this.

One of the worst bi-products of this poverty is the sex trafficking in these villages. The sex traffickers prey on the poverty of these families. They go to these villages, meet with a family, promise their daughter a better life if they'll let her go with them into the city, and even give the family money. It only takes about \$100 to convince a starving family it's worth selling their daughter off. Besides, it's going to be better off for her, right? So, they give her away. These traffickers pick up little girls who are 15, ten—even five years-old—and take them down to Katmandu where they put them in a brothel. They break them, drug them, rape them repeatedly and then require them to do whatever the men who go into these brothels want them to do. Some of these little girls have 15 to 20 customers per day.

This is their life: shamed, used, abused and they can't get out. The police are corrupt because they are paid-off by the traffickers. The traffickers threaten the girls that, if they leave, they will kill their families. Some of these girls are kept in Katmandu. Others are taken to India, the Middle East or North Africa. We are talking about thousands and thousands of girls who are taken from impoverished villages like the ones we visited.

If that's not enough, then on top of that, they are totally unreached with the gospel. There were 24 Tibetan, Buddhist people groups and it was four days before we met anybody who had heard about Jesus before we got there.

There was a moment when we were actually standing beside a Hindu holy river. There is a traditional custom when a family member dies, the body is taken within 24 hours and brought to this river. A funeral pyre is set up over the river and the body is burned over the river to let its ashes go down into the river because this is helpful in reincarnation. We turned the corner and saw the river, funeral pyres spread out up and down the river, and families crying over these bodies. I stopped and was looking at physical bodies burning who were alive the day before and I knew that what I was seeing was a

representation of a much, much deeper and graver eternal reality. As I watched these bodies burning, I realized most of them never even heard the gospel.

I was praying, “God, have mercy on them—these men, women, their families and kids. God, have mercy on these girls.” I was praying and praying that God, in His providence, might use my pleading and the pleading of His people. May God wake us up to plead for the unreached.

God, use our pleading to achieve Your purposes in that place to glorify Your name as the Defender of the poor, Deliverer of the slave and Savior of the people. Jesus, You’ve purchased—as we read earlier—men and women for God from every tribe and every one of those people groups.

I was pleading, “God, do whatever it takes. Here’s my life. Take it and use it however You want for the praise of Your name in that place.”

So are we pleading like that for God’s mercy on sinners? May God have mercy on them.

This leads to what Moses prays next in Exodus 33.

## **Secondly, he pleads for God’s presence and power among His people.**

Look at the next chapter starting with the first verse:

*The LORD said to Moses, “Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give it.’<sup>2</sup> I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.<sup>3</sup> Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people” (Exodus 33:1-3).*

God says, “Okay, the land is yours but you won’t have Me. I won’t go with you.” In other words, “You can have My promise but you won’t have My presence.”

What would you do if you were in Moses’ shoes here? Be careful not to answer too quickly because you and I are tempted in a strangely similar way every day across our church culture. Think about it. In our lives and churches, you and I are tempted every day to do the work of God apart from the power of the presence of God.

Let’s be honest with each other, brothers and sisters. We have created a whole host of means and methods for doing ministry in the church today that require little, if any, help from the Holy Spirit of God. We don’t have to fast and pray for the church to grow. We have marketing for that. We don’t have to pray for the crowds to come. We have publicity.

It is dangerously possible for you and me to carry on the machinery and activity of the churches we lead—it can be smooth and even successful—and never notice the Holy Spirit is absent from it. If we're not careful, we will deceive ourselves by mistaking the presence of physical bodies in the building with the existence of spiritual life in a church.

I wonder if the greatest hindrance to the advancement of the gospel in our day may be the attempt of the people of God to do the work of God apart from the power of the Spirit of God. Maybe the greatest barrier to the spread of the gospel isn't the self-indulgent immorality of our culture, but the self-sufficient mentality in the church evident in our prayerlessness.

What does Moses do when he's faced with doing the prospect of God's work apart from God's presence? He prays. In verses 7-11, he goes into the tent of meeting, and then it says in verse 12:

*Moses said to the LORD, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.'<sup>13</sup> Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."*

Moses knows there is an obvious discrepancy here between what God is calling Him to do and the resources he has to do it. He knows he can't do this work alone and needs God to go with him. He will settle for nothing less so he stays in the tent until God says in verse 14, "*My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.*"

Even that's not enough for Moses so he continues in verses 15-16:

*And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"*

Moses doesn't just want God's presence and power with him but also with them—him and the people. He knows there is a corporate element to God's purpose in the world so he pleads for God's presence and power among His people.

Brothers and sisters, we must pray in the same way. We need God to show the power of His presence in the midst of His people in our day. There is an obvious discrepancy between what God has called every one of us in this room to do and the resources we have to do it. We cannot shepherd the church in our own skill, program ministry in the church through our own power, nor make disciples in our neighborhoods and nations by mustering up more of our own might. We need God. We need to fall on our faces and plead for God to show His power in His people.

When you get to the pages in the New Testament, isn't this why we see so few exhortations to pray for the lost and so many to pray for God's power in the church? When God's power is present among His people, the gospel spreads to the lost. Matthew 9:37-38 says, *"Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'"* They are waiting to hear so what do we pray for? "Lord, wake up Your people to go to work. Send Your people out with power."

It is mindboggling that you and I would be called upon by Christ to tell God what He needs to do and who He needs to send to accomplish His purposes in the world. It's a mystery.

In Acts 4, they are being persecuted so what do they pray? They start with the doctrine of providence:

*"And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, <sup>25</sup> who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,*

*"Why did the Gentiles rage,  
and the peoples plot in vain?*

*<sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers were gathered together,  
against the Lord and against his Anointed'—*

*<sup>27</sup> for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.*

They knew their persecution was preordained so they prayed:

*<sup>29</sup> And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, <sup>30</sup> while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."*

*<sup>31</sup> And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*

They pleaded for the presence and power of God upon His people and He answered. Acts 4:33 says, *"And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all."*

In the next chapter, more than ever believers—multitudes of both men and women—were added to the Lord.

This is how we pray and what we pray for, and this is how God acts. We pray for the power of God to fall on the people of God, He does it and the effects give Him glory.

Brothers and sisters, let us not settle for prayerlessness, and so settle for powerlessness. Let us throw aside our damning dependence on natural ability and human ingenuity. Let us plead for God to do—in our churches, across our country and among the nations—what only God can do.

Jonathan Edwards said, “Only God is able to do the work of God; and, it is His will that when God has something very great to accomplish for His church, it will be preceded by the extraordinary prayers of His people.”

We plead for God’s mercy on sinners, for God’s presence and power among His people.

### **Thirdly, Moses pleads for God’s glory on the earth,**

As if Moses had not been bold enough already! God has relented wrath and He’s promised His presence among His people. If I were Moses, I would be content at this point, but not Moses. He had prevailed with God in prayer and yet he tarries in the tent and asks for one more thing. Exodus 33:18 *“Moses said, ‘Please show me your glory...’”*

Think for a moment about the man who is making this request. This is the man who got to speak with God in a bush that blazed with fire but didn’t burn out; who had a front-row seat on seeing God split a sea in half right before his eyes; who saw God lead him and his people with a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night; who struck a rock and water came out to replenish his people; who prayed for food and bread fell from the sky; and who was invited to come up on Mount Sinai and commune with God when everyone else was warned to stay away. If anyone had seen the glory of God, it was Moses. He had seen so much.

Here’s the deal: he wanted more. There’s something about the glory of God that, once you taste it, gives you an insatiable desire for more. So he prayed and pleaded for God to show him the fullness of His glory. God said, “Moses, you don’t know what you’re asking for.” A complete revelation of God in all His glory would annihilate Moses on the spot. Moses was pleading for that which would obliterate him. Yet, God agreed to show him His back—a partial view, so to speak—which we see in the next chapter is a breathtaking glimpse of God’s faithfulness, forgiveness, goodness and glory.

This is the end of prayer. Isn’t it? This is the termination of all supplication. We pray because we want God. We pray because we want to see Him and know Him.

A.W. Tozer said:

I want to deliberately encourage this mighty longing after God. The lack of it has brought us to our present, lowest state. The stiff and wooden quality of our religious lives is a result of our lack of holy desire. Complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth. Acute desire must be present or there will be no manifestation of Christ to His people. He waits to be wanted. Too bad that with many of us, He waits so long—so very long—in vain.”

We pray because we want God, to see Him and know Him, and we want His glory on the earth. This is how Jesus taught us to pray: “*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*” (Matthew 6:9-10).

Do you hear it? Do you see it? This is providence in prayer. His name will be hallowed. His Kingdom will come. His will is going to be done on earth as it is in Heaven. All of these things will happen in response to the prayers of His people.

Revelation 8 tells us that the prayers of the saints are being stored in the heavenly places. They are accumulating at the altar of God. Every single prayer for the Kingdom of God to come and for the glory of God to be made known is fueling the fire of incense that one day soon will usher in the climax of all history and the consummation of God’s Kingdom. Not one of them is lost in transmission nor uttered in vain.

Do not underestimate the role of desperate prayer in your life, family and church and the mystery of divine providence in the universe. Plead for God’s mercy upon sinners and for God to relent His wrath. Plead for God’s presence and power among His people and for His glory upon the earth. Plead and plead some more. Keep on pleading until the day when Scripture promises us we shall see His face in all of His unchanging perfections. Keep pleading as all of His unchanging purposes and promises come to pass in an ever-unfolding plan of which you and I get to play a part.

Let’s pray—not as a routine formality to end our sermons—but as a relentless reality in our lives, families and churches. God, may it be so.

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