

My message today is '**pray**'.

Oh! You were expecting a bit more. Well here are some good books on the subject: yancey, hybels, mulinde (Uganda took the promise), abbot, huggett. These books will tell you everything you need to know about prayer and a whole lot more.

Jesus didn't teach a great deal about prayer. He did it. The gospels record Jesus regularly retreating to a solitary place to pray. When the disciples pressed Jesus to teach them to pray, he managed it in 4 sentences. He said to them, "When you pray, say: " 'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.' " Simple.

Pray is a verb. We can debate how to pray till the cows come home but what really matters is actually praying. Again and again, the bible calls us to pray. "Pray in the spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests" (Ephesians 6:18) "Be faithful in prayer" (Romans 12:12) "Pray constantly" (Acts 1:14) "constantly pray" (2 Thessalonians) "devote yourselves to prayer" (1 Corinthians 7:5).

Prayer should be simple. Praying essentially means addressing God as 'you'. It means having a conversation with God. Honouring Him, confessing our sins to Him, bringing our needs to Him and listening to what He has to say to us. It is an amazing privilege. Through the sacrifice of Christ, we are able to speak direct to our holy and almighty God.

Prayer should be simple but it is not easy. It takes effort, application and practice. It is the same with friends. Consider your mate that emigrated to Australia. You send the odd message via facebook. Now and again you get the odd bit of news back. Are you involved in their life? Do they influence you? Do you know them? What about your mum you speak to every day. You know everything she's doing. You know what she thought about Rowan's comments on Sharia law. You know your father can blooming well pack his own case. If you have a problem, you call her and you pretty well know what she's going to say. It takes a bit of application, it requires some listening, but you're involved, you know her and she influences you.

Prayer is not always rewarding. Sometimes its dry and boring. God could make it easy. He could boom: Hi Dan, no problem, whatever you need, have a nice day. Then we'd be off out the door to fill our day with our pleasures. God wants an intimate relationship with us. He wants a relationship of faithfulness. He is a jealous lover. He wants us to seek Him rather than ourselves. If we prayed and the mountain moved immediately we'd have no need to spend time with Him. You'll have a pretty spoilt and disinterested child if you immediately agree to their every request.

There is a place we can expect God to answer immediately. It is intimacy. The apostles prayed in secret and lived in intimacy with God, and they remained in his presence when they prayed for miracles in public. Jesus said his sheep would know his voice. The sheep know the shepherd's voice because they are always in his presence. They listen to him and learn to recognise his directions. We are called to follow Jesus like sheep. At first sheep have a tendency to wander off as they hardly recognise the shepherd. As they remain with him, they get to know the way he speaks.

Prayer can't be taught in one sermon. It takes practice. Our privilege is to have a direct line to the Father, wherever we are. We can practice in our home, on the bus, in the office. Our conversation with God is perhaps the primary manifestation of our relationship with God. It should be the main way we get to know Him. If we get prayer right, everything else will fall into place.

THE PASSAGE

Lets listen to God's promise again: "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, 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 will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." 2 Chronicles (7:14)

God makes a special covenant of protection with his people. Its as true for us as it was for Solomon and Israel. We are God's people, called by his name. If our land needs healing, He promises to come and heal it, provided we satisfy 4 conditions. We must (i) humble ourselves, (ii) pray, (iii) seek His face and (iv) turn from our wicked ways. These conditions stand together. 3 out of 4 is not enough. That is why this sermon is coming in four parts. We need to understand each condition and then we need to practice each condition.

God calls us to pray. Four things strike me about the kind of prayer God is calling for here. He calls us to pray for healing, to pray together, to pray with faith and to pray with righteousness. Lets look at each.

1 PRAY FOR THE HEALING OF THE LAND

Consider the context of the promise. It applies when the land is in need. "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people." We cannot explain why droughts, diseases and epidemics come but we should know the Lord is in control and working everything together for his purpose. The Lord will accomplish all he set out to do.

The Lord says do not fear the problems around you. Rather, call on me for healing. Remember the story of Elijah. Israel is worshipping Baal. There are 450 prophets of Baal in Israel. Elijah is the only prophet of the Lord remaining in Israel. Elijah did not despair, he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord shut up the heavens so there was no rain for 3.5 years. Elijah prayed again, and God brought fire to convict Israel of its sin. The people turned from Baal worship, Elijah prayed and the rain came.

Our land is in need of healing too. The water of life once flowed in this country but it has all dried up. Britain is a spiritual desert. All kinds of pests and plagues are eating up this country. It knows nothing of the truth, it claims everything is truth. It knows nothing of purity, it revels in increasing immorality. Its billionaires go tax free, its poor have no route out of poverty. Its children murder its children on the streets. Its enslaved by its consumption and greed. It drinks till it can't remember its pain. It beats its own wife and sleeps with someone else's. It sits in squalid, empty loneliness, while seeking fame at any cost. It works when it should sleep and sleeps when it should work. It hates by football strips and loves by ecstasy and electronica. It considers itself God, it considers not its God. Britain is a desert, devoured by the enemy and corrupted by every kind of disease.

Its not a pleasant picture. Its not like butterflies and meadow flowers on a summer's day. But its true, our neighbours are suffering. We may want to block it out with happy thoughts. But if we honestly consider the tragedies reported in the news, if we consider the pain, illness, oppression, confusion and death our neighbours are suffering, we'd find our nation in dire straits.

God's promise is that if we pray (and fulfil the other 3 conditions), He will hear our prayer and heal our land. It is implicit that we should pray for healing. It would be a nonsense to say God will hear and bring healing, if we were praying for lambourginis. We need to be part of this nation, to understand this nation, to hurt with this nation, to be burdened for this nation - that we might pray for this nation.

We have a responsibility. The healing depends on us. God is not going to heal our land, unless WE pray. And we have an opportunity. We have the right to call on God. Indeed, not just a right, an invitation. If your land is trouble, come and pray to me.

Perhaps we do not believe God's interested in healing the land. Yet we say "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." (John 3:16) If he loves the world enough to give his only son, He certainly loves it enough to heal it of its ills! He promised to heal our land because he loves our land. God is love.

And God is just. Remember the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge. The unjust judge says I'll give her justice or she'll never stop bothering me. And the Lord said, "Listen to what

the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly." (Luke 18:6-10) I tell you the truth, if we cry out to the Lord for justice, day and night, He will see we get justice - and quickly!!

God's purpose is to build a community of nations redeemed by his blood. He longs to see the nations turn to Him. We must learn to pray for God's purposes. Because such are the prayers he answers. Jesus said we should pray for our daily bread but first for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done. If we pray for the justice and love God longs for he will answer.

Consider Peter and John. They heal a crippled man, the Jewish council threw them into prison and threaten them not to speak in the name of Jesus. But the people are praising God for the healing so they are released. On their release, the believers join together in prayer. You might expect them to pray that the Lord would prevent the Jewish Council hindering them or even that the Lord would protect them. But instead they pray for boldness to speak the gospel and healing for the land. "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (Acts 4:29-30)

God is calling us to pray for the healing of our land. We need to pray big prayers. Not just for bread, but for the healing of our nation.

2 CORPORATE PRAYER

And He is calling us to pray together. It is important to note that the promise is given to the people of God. If my people, plural, will do these things together, I will hear them.

Lets go back to Peter and John. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When the believers heard the report, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them." and so on they prayed. (Acts 4:24) The way Luke describes their prayer a little odd. The believers raised their voices together in prayer to God. Luke suggests they were all praying and yet they spoke one prayer. They contended as one man. We often pray together but generally for quite disparate things. Is it possible that we could be so united in heart and purpose that your prayer is my prayer, is her prayer, is God's prayer. I think so.

Chapter 1 of the book of Acts describes Jesus being taken up into heaven. What to the disciples do? "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (Act 1:9-)

They walked to Jerusalem and then join together in prayer. They were all there, the disciples, the women and Jesus' family. They were all together, praying constantly.

What a beautiful picture: joined together in prayer. Prayer is a richly unifying activity. When we pray in the spirit we are in the presence of God. If we pray with others, we rest in God's presence together. We are united in God. We are in Him and He is in us. Great encouragement and unity come from corporate prayer. As we know our Thursday morning prayers are held together by a faithful few. They know something of the power of God in corporate prayer. Those of us who pray before the service know a little too. The rest of us are missing out.

What follows the constant, joined together prayer of the disciples? **Pentecost.**

The Lord is calling us to pray together. To have the same heart for his purpose, to shed the same tears for this nation and to pray as one man. He longs to see us united in Him and ordains prayer as the place we enjoy this most spiritual communion. Together in Christ we have authority over this nation.

3 PRAYER OF FAITH

And the prayer required is a prayer of faith.

The promise begins with a call to humility. As Julio explained, a humble man knows he's dependant on God's grace, he knows God is in charge. There is no prayer without humility. We must acknowledge our need for God's help and recognise he alone has the power to move the mountain. There are 2 traps to watch out for. Thinking we can move the mountain we face and doubting God has the power to move the mountain. Either trap will stop us praying.

Remember Jesus' healing of the demon possessed boy. His father tells Jesus that the boy has been possessed since childhood. He cried out to Jesus, "if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." (Mark 9:23) All things are possible if you believe.

God is faithful. He does not speak and then not act. We can rely on all his promises, every one. "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?" (Numbers 23:19) Prayer is one condition. Be assured, if we pray, and fulfil the other 3 conditions, God will bring the healing he promised.

Is it possible? Could God really heal the ills of this generation? All things are possible. God has power to heal every nation and then some. "He is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20). How much do we ask God to do in our land? How much do we imagine God will do in our land? He can do immeasurably more than that.

James wrote about praying with faith. He said: "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. (James 5:13-15)

Are you in trouble? Pray. Are you sick? Get the elders to pray for you. James believed in the power of prayer. And James says it is the prayer of faith that makes the sick person well. Remember the healings of Jesus. He told the people that their faith had healed them. The sick person does not need faith to be healed but someone must have faith for there to be healing. We must pray in faith if we want God to hear. Did you hear the echoes of 2 Chronicles in James' encouragement. He said, pray to God for healing and God will hear, he will forgive (even if he was not asked to) and He will heal. The sickness and the sin are intertwined. Jesus considered them interchangeable, remember his forgiveness of the paralytic man.

And as James said, lets consider Elijah. Lets resolve to be like him. For he was a man, just like us. And he prayed and the heavens were shut up. And later he prayed again and the rains came. Elijah is the model for praying in faith. Everything was against Him but he did not despair. He prayed and trusted God, and amazing miracles followed.

I'd love to say more on this but there's not time. May I encourage you to consider Elijah's story as you pray this week. I will let Jesus conclude on praying in faith. "Have faith in God," Jesus [said]. "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." (Mark 11:22-25)

Believe that you have received it and it will be yours! Any mountain we can overcome it with prayer and faith. But faith is required. If we doubt, it will not happen. Doubt has spread through the western church like a disease. I believe we should address doubt with prayer and action as we address every disease. We should pray that Lord helps our unbelief and fan into flames the gift of faith God has given us. We can do this by practising prayer. Pray, believe, receive. Pray, doubt, don't receive. Pray, believe, receive. Pray, believe receive. In time, by practice, we will not doubt that God answers prayer.

We can increase our faith in other ways. We need to know the God of the bible. As we better understand God's nature faith increases. The bible notes that every father knows how to give good gifts. If his child asks for an egg, he does not give them a snake. And observes that, if we know this, how much more will our Father in Heaven gladly give us what we ask for. Most of us doubt because we do not know God as a loving Father who gladly gives. We doubt so much that we hardly ask for what we need. James says "You do not have, because you do not ask God." (James 4:3)

If we do ask, we often don't receive. Rather than increase, our faith decreases. There are a number of reasons we may not receive. One is motive. Let's remember that God knows the deep motives of our heart. James explains "When [we do] ask, [we] do not receive, because [we] ask with wrong motives, that [we] may spend what [we] get on your pleasures." God knows whether you really want the money for the church roof or a lambourgini.

4 THE NECESSITY OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

This brings me to my final observation on this promise - the necessity of righteousness. The 4th condition is that we turn from our wicked ways. Piers will consider our call to righteousness in 2 weeks time but I want to briefly address how it connects to prayer.

Righteousness is the door to powerful prayer. I am convinced our prayers are meaningless if we continue to live in sin. James wrote that "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." By implication, the prayer of the unrighteous man is not.

God does not require sinless perfection. And he does not condemn those who wash their robes in the blood of Jesus. But we are dependent on the daily cleansing of his blood. And he has given us sufficient resources to be free from slavery to sin. We will sin but we should not be controlled. We must not continue to live in sin.

God gave warning through Isaiah that, "When you spread out your hands in prayer, [He] will hide [his] eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, [He] will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. .. Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!" (Isaiah 1:15) This is serious. Even if we offer many prayers, God will not listen. We can pray all we like - night and day. If we continue in sin, God will not listen.

In his first letter, Peter quotes the 34th Psalm which tells us "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." (1 Peter 3:12). We have an equal and opposite promise. If we walk in righteousness the Lord will be attentive to our prayer. But if we continue to live in sin, his face is against us - which is not good! Solomon wrote that "The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous." (Proverbs 15:29)

The path of righteousness is a hard one, it means rejecting some of the desires of our heart, it means sacrifice, suffering for the cause, and commitment. But it is also the way to make your prayer reach God's ear. Spurgeon reflected that a prayer that does not reach God has failed. The goal of prayer must be to reach the ear of God. Righteousness is essential for powerful prayer.

5 CONCLUSION

God calls us to pray for the healing of our land, to pray together, to pray with faith and to pray in righteousness. It shouldn't be so hard to pray effectively. We are in a relationship with God. We just need to deal with God in a way that is appropriate to who he is – caring, unified, faithful and righteous.

We need to pray. Our nation is in desperate need of the healing hand of the Lord. It is our calling to pray for them. God ordained that his church would be a house of prayer for the nations. Frankly, church is meaningless if do not make an impact on our nation. If we're not going to make a difference in our time, we may as well go to heaven now.

Do we want to struggle along, having cups of tea, while everyone is perishing around us. And to stand before Jesus with nothing to show for the time he gave us? We can make what we want of this life. All things are possible for the church that believes. We don't need any more members to do it. The people in this room are enough. Lets imagine we humble ourselves under God, and we seek his face and we turn away from our wicked ways and we join together in prayer and faith that God will heal our land.

God will hear from heaven, He will forgive us and will come and heal this nation.

How exciting would that be? Rather more exciting than church as we know it. Wouldn't it be amazing to see God turn the system upside down, free the captives, release the prisoners and bind up the broken hearted. (Isaiah 61:1)

My message today is pray.

Lets start now.

- 1 We all struggle with prayer, to find time, to find faith, to focus on God, to listen to God. Lets pray for each other. Can you please stand and pray for the person on your left. – pray that God might free them from anything that stops them praying and put in their heart a passion to spend time with Him
- 2 Now lets pray together for our land. Take a moment to consider the ills around us. Lets petition God for these needs. Lets call on him to spread out his hand of healing.

Britain is a spiritual desert. All kinds of pests and plagues are destroying this country. It knows nothing of the truth, it claims everything is truth. It knows nothing of purity, it revels in increasing immorality. Its billionaires go tax free, its poor have no route out of poverty. Its children murder its children on the streets. Its enslaved by its consumption and greed. It drinks till it can't remember its pain. It beats its own wife and sleeps with someone else's. It sits in squalid, empty loneliness, while seeking fame at any cost. It works when it should sleep and sleeps when it should work. It hates by football strips and loves by ecstasy and electronica. It considers itself God, it considers not its God. Britain is a desert, devoured by the enemy and corrupted by every kind of disease.

Okay, that's the end of the sermon but its just the beginning of prayer. If you only remember one thing I've said, remember to pray.