

Acts 7

55 But Stephen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, stared into heaven and saw God's majesty and Jesus standing at God's right side. 56 He exclaimed, "Look! I can see heaven on display and the Human One[m] standing at God's right side!" 57 At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, 58 threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. 59 As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, accept my life!" 60 Falling to his knees, he shouted, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them!" Then he died.

Psalm 31

I take refuge in you, Lord.

Please never let me be put to shame.

Rescue me by your righteousness!

2 Listen closely to me!

Deliver me quickly;

be a rock that protects me;

be a strong fortress that saves me!

3 You are definitely my rock and my fortress.

Guide me and lead me for the sake of your good name!

4 Get me out of this net that's been set for me

because you are my protective fortress.

5 I entrust my spirit into your hands;

you, Lord, God of faithfulness—

you have saved me.

15 My future is in your hands.

Don't hand me over to my enemies,

to all who are out to get me!

1 Peter 2

2 Instead, like a newborn baby, desire the pure milk of the word. Nourished by it, you will grow into salvation, 3 since you have tasted that the Lord is good.

4 Now you are coming to him as to a living stone. Even though this stone was rejected by humans, from God's perspective it is chosen, valuable. 5 You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 Thus it is written in scripture, Look! I am laying a cornerstone in Zion, chosen, valuable. The person who believes in him will never be shamed.[a] 7 So God honors you who believe. For those who refuse to believe, though, the stone the builders tossed aside has become the capstone. 8 This is a stone that makes people stumble and a rock that makes them fall. Because they refuse to believe in the word, they stumble. Indeed, this is the end to which they were appointed. 9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness

into his amazing light. 10 Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

John 14

"Don't be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. 2 My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you? 3 When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. 4 You know the way to the place I'm going."

5 Thomas asked, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

6 Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him."

8 Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us."

9 Jesus replied, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? 10 Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I have spoken to you I don't speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Trust me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on account of the works themselves. 12 I assure you that whoever believes in me will do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than these because I am going to the Father. 13 I will do whatever you ask for in my name, so that the Father can be glorified in the Son. 14 When you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it.

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer:
Amen.

So far, in our series on prayer, we've defined prayer: our words shared with Jesus, who is God's word for us and God's presence with us. We've also explored meditation as a prayer form to help us focus on God's identity, which helps us better identify God's voice when we pray. From here, for the next three weeks, we'll focus on our prayers for ourselves this week, our prayers for our community next week, and our prayers for all creation the following week.

Today, as we turn our attention to prayers for ourselves, we almost immediately get to the nitty gritty, the line on prayer that tantalizes some of us, teases others, and honest to goodness traumatizes some. "When you ask me for anything in my name, I

will do it.” Let’s leave that statement for a moment, though, and reflect on the role that naming our desires plays in our conversations with God.

First, let’s be clear: **any relationship where one person’s primary purpose is to beg for help isn’t a healthy relationship.**

Now, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t ask God to meet our needs, for indeed, even Jesus teaches us to pray and ask for daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil. It’s no problem to ask God for something. But if it’s all that we do, whimpering like pets under the table, we’ve turned God into a genie who grants limited wishes rather than the Lord who transforms all creation. Or even worse, we’ve become the petulant children always begging our divine parent for blessings but never offering words like, “I love you,” or “Thank you,” or even “I see what good you did for others.” So, when we ask God for something, it should come within a greater life of prayer that gives thanks for what we know about God, that

seeks to understand what we don't already know, that admits the wonderful mystery beyond all potential knowledge, and even questions the beliefs we have about God that challenge us.

But many of us have an opposite and equally problematic tendency in relationships: refusing to ask for help at all. People rationalize this behavior with all sorts of thinking. We don't want to bother someone else with our problems. We ought to be able to handle it ourselves. However, this kind of pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality speaks a contrary word to the good news of Jesus. Faith empowers us to admit the absolute truth that we can't save ourselves, that we're limited creatures, that we fail at times; and yet, faith empowers us to bring those needs before Jesus, who brings God's divine desire abundant life for us into our midst. Jesus makes clear that God welcomes prayer, not through spiteful reluctance toward us, but through compassionate companionship with us.

So we ought to ask God for those things we need when we need them, but we also ought to have a conversational relationship with God far beyond simply asking for things. That seems simply enough, right?

Well, let's wait a second. Have you ever had someone ask you for something absurdly contrary to your ability or character? Sometimes these come from situations of simple misunderstanding. When I'm playing basketball with my godsons and, with exuberance, they cry out, "Dunk it, Uncle Drew!" While it breaks my heart to say "No" as I look into those ocean eyes, deep with excitement, some combination of physics and an abiding love of Doritos keeps my 5'10" frame from jumping to meet the challenge of a 10' hoop.

Other questions arise not from a lack of knowledge, but of willful ignorance. And I don't mean that in the most negative version of the phrase. This is that kind of disposition that leads a

child to throw a fit in the grocery store every time they don't get a toy that they want. They can't understand why their parents, who have these magic pieces of plastic that lets them take home anything from the store without actual money, won't give them what they want. Toys aren't bad, but it's not in the parents character to give in to every whim.

That's why, when Jesus says, "When you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it," the most important part of the phrase is **in my name**. Many Christians have taken this to mean by simply speaking the name of Jesus in prayer, we'll get whatever we want. Maybe that's why some prayers use the word "Jesus" more than the rest of the words combined. You know the ones I'm talking about, that go something like: "Dear Jesus, I pray to you Jesus, because Jesus, I want more Jesus, Jesus." Oddly enough, there's no biblical evidence or research that suggests this redundancy increases the efficacy of your prayers. Praying in the name of

Jesus means much more than repeating his names. It means praying for things that align with God's incarnation, that reflect God's integrity. It doesn't mean getting everything we want. It does mean learning to desire what God desires.

That's the key to at least beginning to understand what Jesus means by this promise to give us whatever we ask when asked in his name. If we're asking for unimaginable wealth from a Lord who told us to sell all we have and give it to the poor, even as he himself became homeless in order to follow God's call, then that request isn't in the name of Jesus. If we're asking Jesus to punish our enemies or give us preferential treatment when Jesus died for us even when we'd made ourselves God's enemies through sin, then that request isn't in the name of Jesus. But when we ask Jesus for assistance in things like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comforting those who mourn, providing wisdom in confusing situations, then we're much more likely to hear a yes.

This gets much more complicated, though, when we come to the areas that we pray for which match God's identity, but that don't produce results that obviously reflect God's love in Christ. This is something I'm facing deeply and personally now, for as Karen faces cancer and an unknown future, I'm simultaneously reminded of all the miraculous healings that Jesus performed in the Gospels. I'm reminded of the miracle I've witnessed where my grandmother lived 21 excellent, healthy years beyond the six that doctors gave her after she developed lung cancer. And yet I also know the painful realities that too many people have faced, dying way too young from accidents or disease. Asking Jesus for something in his name isn't an academic exercise for me. It's personal, because you know that the thing I most want in the whole world is for Karen to wake up tomorrow wholly healed. That's my prayer and my hope, and it sure seems to align with God's identity, but I just don't know the outcome yet.

Perhaps the most difficult part of prayer is the reminder that we're not God. That's the hardest part for me. We pray to the best of our faithfulness, and seek to pray in accordance with Jesus's identity, and yet still don't know more than a minute fraction of what God knows. We see the smallest slice of God's perspective on history. Even when what we pray for matches God's identity as we know it, this doesn't mean we fully comprehend what God wants or how God's at work bringing salvation to us all. Just because something seems to us a perfect fit with Jesus's name doesn't mean we know the full story or comprehend the complexities of how God relates to the world.

There's this scene in Bruce Almighty, where Jim Carrey is temporarily given some of God's powers. But when he goes to answer the prayers of all people, he's overwhelmed by the number of prayers that exist, so he does what many of us might: answers yes to all prayers, giving everyone the thing they've sought. That

seems wise until the nightly news reveals the lottery's record number of winners means that every victor will take home only a handful of dollars. How God answers prayer isn't a simple process of addition. It's more like quantum mechanics. What we commit to as Christians isn't just that Jesus is God. It's that we're not God, so our prayers ultimately should have that tinge of truth Jesus offered on his way to the cross: take this cup from me, though not my will, but yours be done, Lord God. This is what we want, but we trust you to make sure that, somehow, someday, all things are made new.

And you see, for Karen, and for all of us, God already has intervened in Jesus. In the crucifixion and resurrection, God said yes to every prayer prayed in Christ's name. For those who suffer, God suffers with them. For those who face loneliness like criminals facing capital punishment, God joins them. For those who enter death, so too God lays in the grave. And when it seems like all the

prayers we've offered were pointless, as we cry at the edge of the tomb where our Lord's body rests, Jesus rises from the grave, making possible all that seems impossible.

So, friends, as we pray for ourselves, we must remember two things: if we want any chance of a yes, then our prayer must be in the name of Jesus, which means they must reflect the desires of Jesus. And, as we pray to Jesus, we must remember, that we're admitting we're not God, that ultimately we're aligned with God regardless of the outcome of our prayers. We leave our prayers in God's hands, trusting that, even if we don't get the immediate outcome we want, that God will deliver us into eternity, where suffering and shame, hunger and poverty, hatred and injustice all have no place, where they simply don't exist.

Practically, then, how do we begin this process? We begin by remembering what prayer is: a conversation with Jesus, who is God's word for us and God's presence with us. We also take last

week's focus seriously, and meditate on who God is. That way, we'll have a more accurate understanding of God as we begin to pray. And then, as we pray, we reflect on something that we want, that means something to us, and ask how it aligns with the name of Jesus. Just as Jesus did in the garden of Gethsemane, this might even look like reflecting out loud about whether it's truly within God's will, which shows a healthy awareness that, though we know God, we don't fully know what God knows. Then, as we say amen, we would do well to end with Jesus's own words: Lord, not my will, but yours, be done.

So, to practice today, first close your eyes, put your feet on the floor, and take a deep breath. Then think of something that you want God to do, something for which you need to ask God.

Remember that you're a creature meant to pray, meant to be in relationship with God. Then, take a moment and reflect: does this truly reflect the identity of Jesus? Is it something that God would

want, or is it more about what I want? If it's more selfish than selfless, look instead toward what God might want for you instead. Where you can find life abundant outside of that thing where you've fixated? Now, once you've got something, lift it to God, saying, something like this: "Lord Jesus, I want this in my life. If it's faithful to your name, then I ask that you'd give it to me, so that others might come to know your glory. If this is only my will and not yours, Lord, then I ask that you'd reveal what you truly want for my life, and how I can find your abundant joy in the midst of my daily journey. Amen."

(After a time for those prayers to be lifted) Amen.