

# Marion weekly update

AUGUST 14, 2022

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON Aug 7, 'Prayer: Pray for a Spell' Deuteronomy 8:18-20, John 10:10, Job 1:10, Psalm 34:7, 2 Chronicles 7:14

This week we're taking a little turn in our series on prayers in scripture. We've been looking at actual prayed prayers and what they have to tell us about the history of our faith, faith itself, and how it informs our practice of prayer and faith in our own lives. Today we shift gears a bit. Today rather than looking at prayers prayed in scripture, we are going to look at some examples of how scripture is used, often unwisely, to guide the content and attitude of our prayer.

Scripture is many things. It holds the understanding of redemption. It tells the story of God and God's people through the ages. It is a guide to what it looks like to live rightly, and unrightly, before God. As a guide, we take cues on what to pray for from the stories of faithful men and women of the Bible. We also take our cues from the promises, or perceived promises, of God noted in scripture.

This is where things get sticky.

Claiming promises made to a person or people, in a specific context, at a specific time is dangerous. If God makes a promise to you three weeks ago, do I get to claim that God has made me that same promise today? If God makes a promise to a nation three thousand years ago, does it mean we get to claim that promise for our nation today? If someone, like Elijah passing on a double portion of his power to Elisha, is given the ability to grant a blessing long ago, am I guaranteed to be able to grant that same blessing today?

This is a core issue of prayer far too often today. I'm not trying to be critical here, but there is an arrogance in assuming that every promise, blessing, gift, call, and so on that God has given to any other person or people is also given to me. That something is recorded in scripture doesn't necessarily mean that I get to claim it. Particularly because we typically only like to claim the good stuff. I'll claim wealth and protection but not stoning, persecution, and hardship. It's very convenient.

Of the many things that scripture is, it is NOT a code book, riddle to solve, or literature to bind the creator of the universe to accomplish my agenda or desire. But far too often I've heard it preached that we use scripture in prayer because this is God's promise and word, and therefore to invoke it is to paint God into a corner to either deliver or be made to be a liar. This isn't scripture. Scripture reveals God, it points us to God, but it is not a means of strong arming God.

On a different front we also need to be aware of a danger. So often the extreme twists and misappropriations of scripture are swallowed because there is a nugget of truth in the mix. We have to acknowledge the truth because that is genuine. At the same time we do well to know the difference between the truth itself and the lies that get cultivated attached to the truth.

As we pray and look to scripture for what is and is not prayer in God's will, we can forget that we have a gold standard to compare the "what" of our prayers to. That standard is Jesus. The Jesus of the gospels. Not the Jesus that's been culturally and nationally appropriated. The Jesus of the Bible.

The gospels have an interesting issue. They are broken out very clearly at Christmas and Easter. They are used in our understanding of how salvation is accomplished. They are the texts of Holy Week and Easter. They are the source of our hope in miracles. What is too often left out of the bookends of life and death is the content of His life and ministry.

Jesus spends His ministry showing what it looks like to understand God and live before God correctly. He is instructive. He models. He shows us exactly what we're supposed to be. Yet in too much Christian thinking and praying this is left out. Old Testament verses are cherry picked and New Testament epistles are twisted to fit our personal agendas. Meanwhile, we have this entire ministry of Jesus teaching and demonstrating for us to hold up as the litmus test for whether or not we are understanding the Old and New Testaments. How am I understanding a passage outside the gospels? Let me check on Jesus and see if it matches up. If not, I need to do some more work to get clear on it.

This morning we're going to look at three common twists where scripture is misused to try and accomplish goals of our own agenda rather than simply fall into God's.

The first is prosperity. Here's the nugget of truth. I believe that God has no desire for any of us to be destitute and our needs unmet. God's original intent for creation was perfection. If things are imperfect, that's not God's agenda, it's our predicament. Sometimes we have difficulty because of our own choices. Sometimes it's circumstances beyond our control. Sometimes it's the result of another's choices. Whatever it is, it's not God's desire.

It's also true that everyone doesn't start from the same position of possibility. There is a great divide of opportunity between someone born to a stable family with two happy parents, never wanting, being guided and instructed, having access to more than adequate care, always fed, encouraged in school, sent to whatever further education was necessary for a career or trade, and loved fully; and someone born to a single drug addicted parent in the projects, constantly fearing for their safety, never knowing if they will eat on any given day, malnourished, subpar schools, battling illness because they live in poor conditions and don't have enough to eat, and having no one to push them to their potential.

We hear the one in a million success stories, and they are phenomenal. I can tell you from experience working with actual families in the actual projects that they are the exception not the rule. And it's not because people are lazy or lack desire. They lack resources, support, and opportunity. That is our fault as a people and nation, not God's.

God wants us all to be healthy and have our needs met.

So of course it's not an issue to pray for prosperity. We'd all love to be in that position. The question isn't whether it's okay. The question is what would we do with all that excess if the prayer is answered?

But we see promises in the Old Testament that go back to the Deuteronomy style sense of obedience and reward. Do good and you'll be healthy and wealthy. Do bad and you'll be poor and sick. But remember, this was made thousands of years ago to a specific people at a specific time. When Jesus came around, He fulfilled that old law and covenant. He put a whole different spin on what's to be sought. It's not the material. It's the spiritual. It's not on what we get but what we give.

Jesus' stance is different. He's the one who challenged those who would follow him by saying "even foxes have their dens and birds their nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head."

Jesus' own words have been twisted. He said that his desire is the we "have life and have life abundantly." This has been twisted to assume abundance means material wealth. It doesn't. He didn't say I came so you can have life and live it rich with swag. He said abundantly. His example in His own life and ministry is clear. An abundant life is a life that is full of grace, giving and love. It is a life that makes other lives better. It is a life of sacrifice. This is an abundant life. Jesus makes it clear in His teaching and witness that it's about what we give not what we gain.

I've heard scripture quoted and prayers prayed using Old Testament promise and Jesus' words about abundance that are offered as "codes" and "guarantees" to get material wealth. I sat in a service once where these kinds of passages were quoted and the congregation asked to hold their wallets in the air if they wanted a financial blessing from God. It doesn't work like that. It never did.

Far more significant to God is the love we share and spread. Material didn't matter to Jesus. It matters to us because we have lives to lead and families to feed. But in terms of economy, we do better to focus on God's economy rather than the economy of the world.

The second matter is protection. We read passages like Job about a "hedge of protection" and about angels guarding us. These are wonderful and encouraging. The truth here is that yes, God watches over us. There are stories upon stories about people being brought through circumstances that in natural terms would have been deadly but supernaturally things somehow worked out in their favor. These things DO happen.

At the same time we have to honestly recognize that not every prayer for protection is answered. We pray, and people get hurt anyway. We pray and people die anyway. This is the truth as well.

It doesn't mean God is unfaithful.

In Job's case, that protection if we take the passage literally was offered to Job and Job alone. In much of scripture, God's love and watching out for us is offered in poetry which is given to extreme expression. And even Jesus notes that it's idiotic to do something we know is wrong or foolhardy and expect God to somehow save us despite our stupidity. Yet we have these strange ideas about praying protection around a place or space. I was firsthand witness to someone offering a prescription for how to pray around a building to ensure no evil could possibly enter it. It was specific and tailored. I guarantee you that it didn't work given what I know has happened in that building since then. This isn't a problem with God. It's a problem with us.

With this kind of formulaic prayer that expects we can corner God into making something happen, a barrier is crossed. There are practices that trust a specific combination of words, timing, and offering to accomplish prescribed results. They are called spells and are tied to witchcraft, voodoo, and so on. Christianity isn't this. We pray to God. We trust God. But we don't have the ego to expect we can somehow bend God to our will.

The final prayer is the nationalist prayer. We expect God to bless our nation because we claim we are a Christian nation. We are not. The majority of our nation is not Christian. Too many of our population who claim to be Christian don't act like Christians. And this common prayer to hold God's feet to the coals to bless our nation is short-sighted.

Don't get me wrong, praying for God to watch over our nation, bless our nation, guide our nation, and redeem our nation are wonderful and necessary. We jump the line when we hold the attitude that God MUST and WILL bless our nation as we so call it out and in response to a demand we pull out of scripture that isn't even applicable to our circumstance.

This is the reason for a more honest, thorough, and real dive into scripture and history.

When we look at passages like Chronicles where if God's people will repent, change and turn to God the land will be healed, there are some significant details at play here. First and foremost, this was a statement made not to modern any country but to ancient Israel. Israel also had aspects that America today does not, and it matters. More than a nation defined by boundaries, Israel was a peoplehood bound by a common ethnicity, culture, and all of it tied together through a common faith in the same God. They knew the same Law, the same traditions. There was bond after bond, centuries on centuries old with this nation. They had centuries on centuries of history binding them together with all of this in common.

There was genuine foundation and possibility that common ground to return to a solid faith and practice of that faith before God could be found. And if that could occur, healing would as well because this return to faith would permeate the entirety of the land.

We are not ancient Israel. We have a richly diverse cultural background. We have a freedom that allows us to worship what, who, and as we so desire. More and more we aren't on the same page. We don't share the same values. In fact we are encouraged to be independent in our thinking and respect that in others as well. This isn't remotely the situation of the words in Chronicles. To claim it isn't honest.

Moreover, I've heard firsthand attitudes that come from claiming this that push further from rather than closer to Christ. In order to get us all on the same page the natural attitude is to either push those who don't agree with us out of the country or force them to believe, or at least act, the way we want them to. This isn't Jesus. This isn't the One who gave us the Great Commission. Rather than alienate or oppress, Jesus calls us to influence, inspire, and invite. He calls us to come near to those who are different for the sake of introducing them to what it looks like to follow Jesus and live a life redeemed by and correct before God.

Wanting a healed land isn't about the easy road of forcing and coercing. It's about the hard, honest work of relationship building and helping the world come to a place where it realizes that the only way for it to be all it can be is to embrace the way of love, grace, and compassion. The way of Christ.

Missing the fullness of scripture, and twisting it into prayers and words the push away from Christ rather than drawing towards is arguably one of the greatest tragedies of twisting scripture for our own prayerful ends. Not only does it shortchange the effectiveness of our prayer life, more significantly it misrepresents Jesus to the world, driving the world away from Him.

The question then is how do we pray scripturally? How do we get inspired by the prayers and promises we read without claiming something that isn't ours to claim, or being arrogant enough to assume the agenda we read into scripture binds God to give us what we want? I point us to Jesus, and the spirit behind prayer rather than trying to figure out nuts and bolts of some code that obligates God to give us our way.

Let's look at the three examples we've considered this morning.

"Lord, I pray that you would allow my household to prosper. To have what we need and have it in abundance. Give me the heart then and now to use what I have to bless and uplift not just my family, but the community around me and those who are in need."

"Lord, I pray you would bring prosperity to my home. I pray that you would give me a heart to use that prosperity to glorify you, serve you, and meet the needs of your children that you call me to."

"Lord, please keep us safe in our travels. Help us to travel with awareness of dangers before us, and regard to those who are traveling alongside us. Give us the patience to travel without rash or angered responses. If inconvenience or problems should come our way, help us handle them with calm and gracious hearts."

"Lord, protect my children from harm and pain. Yet should harm or pain befall them let them know you are by their side, and that even in the darkest moments you can work those circumstances to grow them, and let them see you."

"Lord, bless and guard our nation. Guide us to use our many freedoms to love each other without hesitation, to connect and unite in a way that shows your grace and love despite our differences, to be lights to one another and to all the world of what your love looks like."

"Lord, help us to look to you as we engage the direction of our country. Give us the courage and humility to let you guide our politics rather than letting our politics twist our understanding of you. Bring us together as a family before you. Guide us to influence those who don't yet know you to find you, and to give us a spirit of welcome and unconditional love to those we may rather avoid, yet you call us to embrace."

Scripture married to prayer is a marvelous and wondrous thing. What makes it so is to let scripture inform the intent and spirit behind the prayer rather than demanding an outcome. It was never intended to some code for a rare few to crack so

we can bend the Creator of the universe to grant us our wishes. The intent is to find and live into God's will. The spirit is humility, compassion, love, and grace. These two together form an attitude that is shaped by love and want for the others around us.

When this is the case, we may not get what we "want" but we get what we need. We get a closer walk with God. We get a more fulfilling life lived in God's grace and love. We experience the fullness of God revealed when our lives match what God is desiring for our lives. We are content. And this content is notable to those around us. Perhaps this is some of the best evangelism. To be seen in that content, and having the one seeing us wonder how we can be so content. Then when they ask, offering them the reason. A life not only claiming Jesus as savior, but living into that salvation as well.