

## Prayer – Jeremiah 33

Years ago, I went over to my parents' house in Ft. Worth and I found my mom playing a game of Solitaire. As far as I know, that's the only card game she ever played and she would probably be embarrassed if I told you this because she wouldn't want to be known as a card player. That's too much like gambling, you know. Seriously, when we were kids, I can remember playing Go Fish with my sisters and my dad said, *"Now, if anybody rings the doorbell, put those cards away quick. I don't want them thinking we are gambling in here."* Seriously, Pop? I'm 6 years old. Nobody's going to think there's an illegal gambling ring going on at the preacher's house. Relax. But anyway, I see that mom has a game of Solitaire going on and I think I asked her something about how it was going. She said she was doing good. Then she looked at me kind of sheepishly and said, *"But sometimes I cheat."* And in my mind I thought, *"Finally! I found the chink in her armor. I knew she wasn't perfect and here she is cheating at cards. What a scandal! I can't wait to tell the rest of the family that mama is a cheater! Yes!"* So, then I asked her just how she cheated. I wanted to get to the bottom of it. I want all the dirty details before I go to the newspaper with this. And she said, ***"Well...sometimes if I don't know where to play...I pray about it."*** She prayed about it. That was how she cheated. Needless to say, I never went public with this great scandal. No sense smearing the family name with such horrible accusations.

But I think she was right. It almost feels like cheating sometimes, doesn't it? I always wonder how people get through life without a relationship with God. Because whenever we have a need or a want or a question, we can just bebop into the throne room of Almighty God and just ask Him for help. And it's not just possible. He doesn't just grudgingly allow it. He tells us to, commands us to. In **Hebrews 4:16**, God says to us, *"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."* We don't have to make an appointment. We don't have to beg. We don't have to prove that what we want is worth His time. He says, *"Come on!"* Isn't that great?

This is our last message on the subject of sanctification. What is sanctification? It is the process by which God makes us more like Him. He gives us things and takes some things away. He puts us in certain positions and removes us from others. And while we are going through it, it's hard to see what possible good could come of it but then in hindsight we may be able to see what God was doing in our lives. And sometimes we will never see it or understand it until we see Him face to face in Heaven and He will explain it. In this sermon series we have seen how God uses baptism, the church, the Lord's Supper, giving and Bible study to mold us and shape us into His image. It makes us more and more like Him and less and less like the rest of the world because these are things the world does not do.

Now...I did some research. I Googled it. And I found out that 84% of Americans say they have prayed at least once in the past week. That sounds like the vast majority of people – Christians and non-Christians – pray. So, how does prayer work in the sanctification process if everybody does it anyway? Well, I have some questions. Does God hear all those prayers? Does God answer all those prayers? How does prayer even work? Who do we even pray to? Is it God the Father, God the Son or God the Holy Spirit? Does it even matter? Does God hear the prayer of an unbeliever? Those are some big, important questions. So, I'll tell you what. We can Google the answer to those questions and see what everybody on the internet thinks...or we can turn to the Bible and see what God says. What do you think? Good choice. Let's start by looking at **Jeremiah chapter 33** and we will look at some other scriptures in a minute.

Jeremiah is in the Old Testament between Isaiah and Lamentations. It's a fairly long book with 52 chapters. Jeremiah was a prophet who was tasked by God to prophecy what was going to happen when Israel wouldn't repent from their sinful ways. So, he did and Israel didn't repent and the whole nation was taken into captivity. But even in their stubbornness and rebellion, God gave them hope and **Jeremiah 33:2-3** is part of that hope. Let's read it.

*"This is what the LORD says, he who made the earth, the LORD who formed it and established it—the LORD is his name: <sup>3</sup> 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.'*

There is a lot to unpack in just those two simple verses. Let's start with who God says He is. You know, we want to have authorization to ask for things of God in prayer. We don't want to just presume upon God and go barging into His presence without permission. Who is it that is speaking here? Well, God lets us know just who He is and just who is giving us permission. It is the LORD. The original Hebrew word is Yahweh, well sort of. It is actually written without vowels originally and so the proper pronunciation is debated. It may be Yahweh or Jehovah or Yehovah. We don't know for sure. But when you see the word LORD in all caps in the Bible, that is God's name that He gave to Abraham and it is the name God called Himself to Moses in the burning bush when He said, "I Am Who I Am." It means the self-existent one or the eternal one. God has always been and He will always be. Then He reminds Jeremiah of just who Jehovah is. *"Oh, by the way, I created the universe. I formed it. I planned it. I spoke it into existence and I am kind of a big deal."* So, we are told by the Creator and Sustainer of the universe to pray. And the word He uses is to call. Now, I looked that word up too in my 32-pound Strong's Concordance. I figured since I had it out, I might as well look up "call." And I'm glad I did because I found out it goes with the name of who you are calling to. It means to call or cry out to, which is no surprise, but specifically when you know the name of who you are calling to. So, God tells us His name and then tells us to call out to Him by name.

Now, that brings up a common question. To whom are we actually praying? Should we use the name Jehovah when we pray? Are we praying to God the Father, God the Son or God the Holy Spirit? Well, that's a great question actually and someone could easily be confused about it because the psalmist prayed, *"Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray."* (Psalm 5:2) He was praying to the Father. But when Stephen was being martyred, he prayed, *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* (Acts 7:59) Then Paul tells us to pray in the Spirit in Jude but also says that the Holy Spirit actually intercedes for us when we don't know how to pray in **Romans 8:26**. So, which is it? Well, I'm not trying to be a smart alec when I say, "Yes." All of them. And to say "all of them" is technically not correct because all three are One. And all three are active participants in the believer's prayer.

Equally important is whom we are not to pray to. Our Catholic friends are taught to pray to Mary and various saints. Those prayers are not scriptural and are, in fact, an insult to God. The problem with praying to anyone other than God is that He will not share His glory. In fact, praying to anyone or anything other than God is idolatry. "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols" ([Isaiah 42:8](#)). So, to Whom are we to pray? The answer is God. Praying to God, and God alone, is far more important than to which Person of the Trinity we address our prayers.

Let's look closer at **verse 3** now. *'Call to me and I will answer you.'* God says He will answer our prayers. What do you think about that? I know. I know. You are thinking, *"I'm sitting here in church and I'm reading it in the Bible and so I have to agree that it's true but sometimes it doesn't feel like it."* Right? Oh, sure. That's just me that feels that way sometimes. Whatever. Let me start this by giving you a warning. Whenever you read anything in scripture, please keep it in context. Because technically, this verse is not written to us. And you have to be careful about that, especially with verses about prayer. This is God speaking to Jeremiah telling him that He will answer his prayers.

So, can we claim this as a promise to us? Only if it is found in other places in the Bible. So, let's see. **1 John 5** says, *"14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us."* **Matthew 6:6** says, *"But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."* **Matthew 7:7** says, *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."* And **Philippians 4:6** says, *"do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."*

So, we can rest assured that God hears us. It's just that sometimes the answer is yes. Sometimes it is no and sometimes it is wait. And no and wait are hard for us and I think part of the problem with that is we think when God says He hears us that means He will give us what we want. Keep in mind that prayer is not our way of getting God to do what we want. Prayer is so easy and yet can be complicated at the same time. My grandad was a preacher for 50 years or so and my dad was a preacher for years and years and when I became a preacher I remember my dad telling me that he asked my grandad one day how prayer worked. And my grandad just shrugged his shoulders and said, *"I don't know."* That actually made me feel better because there is a lot about prayer we will never know. There is no magical formula for [prayer](#). In the simplest of terms, prayer is staying in communication with God—talking to Him, spending time in His presence, and drawing near to Him. Through prayer, we express adoration and thanks to God, we make requests known to Him, we intercede for others, and we learn more about His character and His will for our lives. So many people think of God as the giant Santa Claus in the sky that we go to when we want something. That's not the purpose of prayer. The good news is that God does promise us this (read what it says) *"I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know."* God wants us to call on Him so that He can answer our prayers. He also wants to share with us incredible blessings that we might otherwise have missed had we not reached out to Him through prayer. Some of us forget that prayer is just having a conversation with God and a conversation implies sometimes you talk and sometimes you listen.

So, what do you do when it seems like God is just not answering your prayer? Well, let's start with fasting. What is fasting? Fasting is doing without food for some determined period of time so you can better hear what God has to tell you. Yes, some people fast from things besides food. Maybe God calls you to fast from TV or internet or some hobby you have. Personally, I am going on a fast for about 10 years now from jogging. 😊 It's not working so far but God tells us not to give up, right? Seriously, biblical fasting is always from food and one commentator said, "The theology of fasting is a theology of priorities in which believers are given the opportunity to express themselves in an undivided and intensive devotion to the Lord and to the concerns of spiritual life. This devotion will be expressed by abstaining for a short while from such normal and good things as food and drink, so as to enjoy a time of uninterrupted communion with our Father." ([What is the connection between prayer and fasting? | GotQuestions.org](#))

I don't like fasting – I mean, do I look like I like fasting? But what I have learned about it is that if you aren't using that time to really be in communication with God then you are just missing meals. If you are going to fast, try fasting for one meal and see how you do. Are you able to spend that whole time communicating with God? If so, try two meals and go from there. There is something unexplainable about fasting that allows us to hear God when otherwise we can't. Maybe it has to do with faith. You remember in **Matthew 17** the disciples were unable to cast a demon out of a man and they asked Jesus about it and He said, *"This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting."* Biblical prayer and fasting are often part of repentance. The first chapter of Nehemiah describes Nehemiah praying and fasting, because of his distress over the news that Jerusalem had been desolated. He prayed with tears, fasting, confession on behalf of his people, and pleas to God for mercy. Like Nehemiah, Daniel fasted and prayed that God

would have mercy upon the people, saying, *“We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws.”*

Also, it's important to make sure that you have no unrepented of sins in your life when you pray. **Isaiah 59:2** states, *“But your iniquities have built barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear.”* If you have sin in your life – even something you might consider small – God will choose not to hear you.

In his book *Why Prayers are Unanswered*, John Lavender retells a story about Norman Vincent Peale. When Peale was a boy, he found a big, black cigar, slipped into an alley, and lit up. It didn't taste good, but it made him feel very grown up. . . until he saw his father coming. Quickly he put the cigar behind his back and tried to be casual. Desperate to divert his father's attention, Norman pointed to a billboard advertising the circus.

*“Can I go, Dad? Please, let's go when it comes to town.”*

His father's reply taught Norman a lesson he never forgot. "Son, he answered quietly but firmly, *“never make a petition while at the same time trying to hide a smoldering disobedience.”* (Kirk Russel)

Norman Vincent Peale died an old man twenty something years ago so let me leave you with a story from a young boy just this past week. He is my great-nephew and his name is Titus. He is four years old. In July of 2024, Titus was diagnosed with strabismus which caused one of his eyes to turn dramatically inward. He became terribly cross-eyed. His parents took him to a pediatric ophthalmologist. They got him special glasses. They patched his eye for hours at a time and did everything else the doctor said to do but they were getting close to having to have surgery or he might become blind in that eye.

My niece Blair, his mama, called me yesterday and told me she decided she was not going to allow that to happen without great effort in prayer and fasting on her part. So, earlier this week she started a three day fast. No food at all for three days. And while she has three young boys, she spent every possible moment in prayer asking God, not to make his eyes better or to even gradually heal them but she said, *“Lord, I'm asking for you to right now heal Titus of this completely.”* And she kept praying and kept praying.

She said finally, on the third day, when she was weak from not eating but determined to do what she told God she would do, she said she felt like she really heard from God. It wasn't audibly of course but she felt God tell her to quit patching his eye and fully rely on God to heal him. So, she did. She even threw the patches away. And when she did God healed him. Just like that. Completely. Fully healed. Not a little bit better. Not gradually. Completely healed. She said when his big brother got home Titus said, *“Look! Jesus healed my eye!”*

*‘Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.’* He will show you through prayer things the doctors could never know. He will show you in your faith and in your persistence things no man can explain. He won't always answer like you want Him to. Even the Apostle Paul prayed three times for relief and God said “No.” But through prayer, God revealed more about grace to Paul than anybody could ever understand outside of a relationship with God. Do you have that relationship?

True communication and fellowship with God in prayer is reserved only for true believers. That means it is for those who have asked God to be Lord of their lives and have surrendered their will to His. That happens when you truly believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay for your sins, the price the Father said was due. That's all you have to do is believe but that belief will change every aspect of your life. Does that sound like you? If not, do it right now as the music plays.