

I ♥ Prayer
Psalm 42:1-8
February 10, 2019

Theme: Passion for Prayer

I want you to remember when. No, further back than that. Go way back. Go back to that time you had your first serious crush. Remember? What was her name? Do you remember how handsome he was? Okay, do you have that picture in your mind now?

What was the one thing you wanted most when you thought of that person? No, not that! More than anything, you wanted to spend time with that special one, didn't you? When you weren't together you were on the phone, and dad was saying, "Get off that phone, someone might be trying to call!"

When you were together or on the phone, you never ran out of something to say and even if you did, you could just gaze into each other's eyes for hours. It never got old did it? Well, at least until you grew tired of each other and found another crush.

When you get to Psalm 42, it might seem like one of those high school crushes we remember so fondly; "**As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.**" I imagine an Arizona Mule Deer during the long hot mountain summer eking out its existence in the shade of trees trying to conserve water until the monsoons finally begin with their thunderous lightning strikes. Puddles form in the malpai rock; fresh, cool, clean water and the deer come to life running, dancing in the rain.

Like the deer seeking fresh water, the Psalm writer asks the question, "**When can I go and meet with God?**" This isn't a rhetorical question for the writer either. The temple was destroyed, the people ripped away from the land God promised them. Without the temple, they didn't believe they could be in God's presence.

I deeply admire and respect those of you who endured long separations from your loved ones because of war or other reasons, especially when the only communication was through written letters. Yet, you were able to keep the relationship alive. I imagine the long-awaited reunion was often followed by significant time reacquainting and adjustment. Valerie and I were apart for just weeks at a time while I was in Pasadena during seminary. I am so grateful for cell phones that enabled us to talk at length without extra charge. We longed to hear each other's voice and it hurt for us to be apart. Valerie would often ask "When are you coming home again," a comment like the Psalm writer's plea to meet with God.

Do you long for God and to be in his presence? This isn't just a Sunday morning question but rather an everyday question. How frequently does the thought of God

come to mind? How often do you engage in short conversations, thanksgivings, intercessions, or praise to God?

For the psalmist, it may have taken the duress of slavery and the loss of the temple before the reality of God's daily presence became so important. Imagine, difficult as it may be, that you are no longer permitted to practice your faith. Churches torn down, public gathering prohibited, even the mention of God or Jesus could bring trouble to you. The persecuted church today can probably relate better than you and I. One estimate places 215 million Christians living under active persecution. North Korea is #1 and no, the US is not on the list of over 50 countries.

Unlike the psalmist, these Christians, even under persecution are in God's presence. They don't have to go to a temple to worship. They don't have to gather, much as they might desire, to worship, and they can talk to God anytime, even from the prison cell. We're soft, comfortable. We don't often "need" God, so we tend to move him to the background of our life until needed.

If we are to be Christian, we must be active in our faith. It is counterintuitive that one can be a passive Christian. This is not dependent upon your age or health either. Longtime history professor at NAU, Garland Downum was a member at Federated Community Church (UM, Presb., Community churches) and even wrote a history of Federated. I had known him from the early 1970's when I worked at a camera store. Garland had dementia in his last years of life and one day, early in my walk toward ministry, I led a worship service at his retirement center. Garland's son, Charles, was present and we began to sing #77, "O, Lord, My God" and for the first time in weeks he broke out in song to Charles' amazement. Garland was a prayer and I don't believe he ever stopped praying despite the dementia. His passion for God definitely didn't stop.

I titled this message, "I ♥ Prayer" because, like my relationship with my loved ones, I have cultivated my relationship to God and prayer is the means to that love. God already loved me just as he has already loved you before you were born, he knit you together, fearfully and wonderfully made in your mother's womb¹. Your "life of prayer," not merely "second-thought" prayer, is what enables you to fully experience God's love, the Holy Spirit, and to have the strength to follow Jesus on this grand adventure.

R.T. Kendall, former pastor at Westminster Chapel in London, wrote a great book, "Did you Think To Pray?" He calls prayer a "fringe benefit" because it is not part of the package of becoming a Christian. He calls it a "privilege" for Christians to enter into prayer, and indeed it is, but it is not limited to Christians, God created all and he's

¹ Paraphrase of Psalm 139:13-18

waiting to hear from us. If it's a fringe benefit to pray, why would you ever not want to receive this benefit of the kingdom? What subject of any kingdom, anywhere, anytime, didn't want to have the ear of the king?

In Jeremiah 33:3, God teaches us, **“Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.”** If prayer is a fringe benefit, it is still essential. You cannot fully benefit from the Christian life without a life of prayer. You cannot reach your potential or serve effectively if your prayer life is weak or sick. We use the term “life of prayer” because it is, and it takes a lifetime of prayer - continuous, often, and intimate, to know God.

In verse 5 of Psalm 42, the writer acknowledges his humanity and struggle; **“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?”** and he repeats this in verse 6 and 11 like a chorus, but he doesn't end with the lament. The next phrase of this chorus is the perseverance of faith and your invitation; **“Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”**

When prayer becomes such a part of you that it is a reflex to respond in prayer and you instinctively turn to prayer in every situation, good and bad; when prayer is your first response, then intimacy with God is natural. You pray in God's will because you already understand his will. You act with mercy and compassion because you are responding to, and following Jesus. Prayer ceases to be a crisis response.

Why do I love prayer? I love prayer because I love God and I want to love him more and deeper. R. T. Kendall challenges people to be in prayer 30 minutes a day to begin. One study revealed the average believer (including pastors) spends less than three minutes a day! Three minutes out of 1,440 each day!

Where ever you are right now in your prayer life, I want to challenge you to start building up to at least 15 minutes a day between now and Easter. If you are already there, or more, work on doubling that time.

Here are some ways you can begin expanding that time, easily. Try some of these ways to expand your prayer life:

1. Pray a Psalm every day
2. Pray your favorite hymn
3. Pray the prayers in the Upper Room Devotional – paper or on-line
4. Pick up a Book of Common Prayer
5. Keep a prayer list and notepad by your prayer spot – actually pray through the list.
6. Pray through the Lakeview prayer list
7. Pray for your friends, pray for your family – be intentional

Once you begin an intentional prayer life, fifteen minutes won't be long enough and you will develop a habit of prayer by Easter. I don't know what God will do with you but I promise you this; If you begin now, by Easter you'll say, "I ❤️ Prayer."