

**June 19, 2017**  
**Prayer: In the Mucky Muck of Life**  
**Genesis 1 – Revelation 22**

Way back in January, we introduced prayer as a key part of a free, open, honest relationship with God.

***Prayer – as it was ...***

All creation – including us – is created to glorify and enjoy God. Genesis 3:8 gives us a wonderful picture of what life ought to be: *"When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man (Adam) and his wife heard the LORD God walking about in the garden ..."* We were created to enjoy walking with, talking with, and living with God.

If you think about that image of God walking with His people in the garden – enjoying a free, open, honest dialogue – that's what our relationship with God (prayer) is ... or ought to be. Prayer is simply conversation with the God who formed, sustains, and loves us.

We can explore Genesis 3 at all sorts of levels, but fundamentally it asks soul-searching questions about our relationship with God. Any healthy, deep relationship is based on love – not love as an emotion, but love as a rock-solid, foundational covenant commitment: loyalty, trust, honesty, respect, desire to honour and serve the other, yearning to know the other deeply in a way you only know that person, a willingness to sacrifice your all for that person, and so much more ... This is how God loves us. What about our love for God?

- Are we loyal to God? Does anything else ever determine our decisions?
- Do we really trust Him? Then will we follow His wisdom?
- Do we really desire to know Him? Then will we listen to Him and Him only?
- Are we honest with Him? Or do we hide parts of our life (or all our life) from Him?
- Do we want to honour and serve God? Or are we more self-centered?
- Do we yearn to know God in a deep, formational, foundational way that is unique to Him and Him alone? Or is He more of an afterthought?
- Will we sacrifice anything for God?
- Do we really love Him? Then will we give our lives to Him?

Genesis 3 also shows us that we human beings tend to be stiff-necked and hard-hearted: we think we know better than God. The theme of Adam, Eve, the serpent, and the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is we like to decide we know what is good and evil. We know better than God. What does that do for conversation with God – prayer? It makes it either (1) irrelevant and unimportant, or (2) awkward and superficial.

Let's be honest. We all have "issues" in our relationship with God. Some people will give us nice, trite answers:

- If you just deal with the unconfessed sin in your life, it would all be good.

- You're holding things back – just "give it all to God" and you'll be fine.
- You're not praying right: here is the "right way" to pray ... (the right words, the right posture, the right place, the right time ...). Some people have found approaches that work well for them, but don't work for other people.
- You don't have enough faith. Get more faith and you'll be good.

There is some truth to some of those statements. But everyone I know struggles to talk with God honestly, openly, personally at times. What's wrong with me? Nothing. We all struggle. We're all in this together.

### ***Prayer – as it will be ...***

A couple of weeks ago we talked about the BIG STORY in Scripture:

- God, the Father, is God-for-us, creating, sustaining, providing, empowering ...
- Jesus, is God-with us, teaching, dying, rising, saving, forgiving ...
- The Spirit, is God-within-us, comforting, guiding, teaching, reminding, correcting ...

There is one more act to come: Jesus will come again, evil will be completely and finally destroyed, and the Kingdom of God in all its fullness will reign. Then, and only then, will our relationship with God once again be as it was intended to be.

In the last chapters of our Bible, John writes, *"I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared ... I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, 'Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever'"* (Revelation 21:1-4).

After an attempt at describing the wonders he sees, John goes on, *"I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light ... Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations ... The throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads"* (Revelation 21:22-22:4).

Sorting through all the imagery, it's a return to the free, open communication of Genesis 3:8. We will know God – and be known by God – personally, directly, and completely once again. But that's in the future. We (1) look forward to that reality, one day some day, and, in the meantime, (2) don't be discouraged: the assumption is that we will not have this direct, clear, perfect relationship with God just yet.

### ***Prayer – as it is ...***

C.S. Lewis' wife, Joy, died from cancer. He comments, *"I'm afraid of thinking that suffering is just suffering after all – no cause, no purpose, no pattern, no sense. Just pain in a world of pain."* This life, he says, is like living in "shadowlands." This is prayer in the real world!

*"Jesus went with His disciples to the olive grove called Gethsemane ... he became anguished and distressed. He told them, 'My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, 'My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine'"* (Matthew 26:36-44). He prayed this three, agonizing, heart-wrenching times. This is prayer in the real world.

God has provided us a way back into his heart through Jesus who lived a perfect life, died in our place, and rose victorious over all the dark powers. We have new life through Him. Our sin, stubbornness, stiff-neckedness, and hard-heartedness is forgiven. We can approach and know God directly and personally in a way we never could before.

Through the work of His Spirit, God is within us. There are times when (I hope) we have felt and known His presence in personal and powerful ways. The Spirit has been like a drink of clear, cold, delicious water on a hot day.

Those things are absolutely true. But much of life is lived in murkier waters. We're dealing with the crises of life right now. Our prayers are not that intense, personal, clear conversation, guidance, and wisdom we would like ...

Moving mountains can wait. For most of us, this prayer in Gethsemane is our best model.

We live in this awkward in-between time – the now and the not yet. Jesus has come. The power of sin and death has been defeated. His Holy Spirit is very real. He is very much with us every moment of every day. But sin and death are still very real, as well. God has won the war, but there is still a lot of messy mopping up to do. The powers of evil are not going down without a major fight (the book of Revelation is very realistic about this ongoing battle ... but also realistic that God wins. No doubt. No debate.).

We live and we pray in these two overlapping worlds. One, marred by sin, evil, war, sickness and pain may be described as shadowlands; we live in the valley of shadows (what Psalm 23:4 literally says). Paul writes, *"Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known"* (1 Corinthians 13:12). This world, at best, is only a dim reflection of what is to come. It is slowly, inevitably, drawing to an end. The other world, the world of God's Kingdom, is slowly, but just as inevitably, winding up. It is a world of purity and peace, love and laughter, hope and healing, justice and joy, knowing and being known. When Jesus returns, it will be complete. And we shall see Him face to face.

In the meantime life is hard. The Bible talks a lot about struggle, wrestling, suffering, even battle and war to describe our present reality – Troy introduced us to that reality as he considered the prayers of the saints in Revelation 6:9-11. No wonder prayer is a challenge.

So what do we do? We can give up ... on God. Or at least on prayer. Or we can decide that a relationship with God – God-for-us, God-with-us, God-within-us – is so important that we persevere. And we pray. We talk with God. We may be anguished and distressed. We may feel our soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. But we keep on keeping on: *"My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine."* And we are realistic that:

- It's not "easy." It's a struggle and spiritual war (Ephesians 6:10-18). We will get distracted. It takes discipline, concentration, and a commitment to keep at it.
- We will not necessarily "feel" anything or hear any clear word from the Lord.
- We draw strength from those times of spiritual closeness to God and push through the times when it's tough slogging to keep talking with Him.
- We know that, whether we "feel" it or not, God has heard our prayer.
- We know that, whether we believe it or not, some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.

God knows this. The Bible is written anticipating this. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, people wrestle with prayer! Abraham, Moses, David, the disciples – they all struggle (this summer we'll look at Psalms: real prayers by real people in real life).

This is Paul advice to us: *"Encourage one another and build each other up ... encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone"* (1 Thessalonians 5:11-14) – we need supportive community to keep at it.

He continues, *"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Being joyful and thankful changes how we see the world: we see God's grace and His blessings, not our problems.

And we persevere – we pray continually. It's a matter of choosing to recognize that, whether we "feel" it or not, God is with us. Whether we "sense" it or not, He does hear our prayers. Whether we are emotional or not, we keep our covenant commitment of love, loyalty, faithfulness, honesty, and service to God.

We choose to walk and talk with God whether we are washing the dishes or walking the dog, making decisions at work or about our vacation, feeling great or in chronic pain. Sharing with and listening to God becomes a habit, a way of living, acknowledging God-for-us, God-with-us, God-within-us in the mucky muck of life. Prayer changes who we are ...