

“Pray Without Ceasing”

Genesis 26: 12-25

Psalm 4: 1-8 and I Thessalonians 5: 12-24

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Please join me in prayer: O Lord, open my mouth that my lips may proclaim Thy praise, and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Psalmist said, *“Answer me when I call, O God of my right. You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.”*
(Psalm 4: 1)

There is a strong Biblical tradition of people realizing it is God who gives them room, it is God who graciously gives us space. My favorite Biblical story of God giving someone room comes from Genesis 26. It is the story of Isaac, the middle patriarch: the son of Abraham, the father of Jacob. Scripture tells us how he was named laughter because God’s incredulous promise of his birth in his parents’ old age fractured them. We know about that terrible day when Abraham took Isaac to the top of a mountain and bound him and laid him on an altar to sacrifice him, but God sent an angel to stop him just as he raised his knife. The angel said, “Do not lay your hand on him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” We know Isaac is really not Abraham’s only son, Ishmael was his half brother and after Sarah died, Abraham married Keturah and had six more sons. But Isaac was the son God had promised, the child of the covenant, through whom God had promised to bless all the families of the earth. Those of us who consider ourselves “children of Abraham” need to remember we have a lot of cousins all over the world, and some are practicing other religions. We know Isaac loved Rebekah, and that together they had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. But only in the twenty-sixth chapter of Genesis do we get a glimpse of the man Isaac was and the life Isaac led.

After his father Abraham died, there was a famine in the land. So Isaac went to Gerar, the land that is now known as the Gaza strip, to King Abimelech of the Philistines. Isaac, like his father before him, became a

resident alien on Abimelech's land. In fact, he sowed seed in that land and in his first year of farming he reaped a hundredfold of what he had sown. That's like a migrant farm worker becoming as rich as Bill Gates. The Lord blessed Isaac, and we are told this blessing took the form of prosperity. He had abundant possessions, a great household, and the Philistines *envied* him. So Abimelech said, "Get out of town!"

The Philistines were afraid of Isaac. They were jealous of his success. I daresay the roots of anti-Semitism, which existed before Christianity, began because people were afraid of this covenant people who were blessed by God. One thing was for sure, Isaac was caught in the age-old politics of land and water rights. To this day, they're still going at it over land and water rights all along the Gaza strip. And let's face it: we are no different. If you have ever purchased a beach sticker for your car, you care about having rights to certain pieces of land and certain bodies of water.

When Abimelech told Isaac to leave, he did not fight for his rights. He did not argue that he had improved the land or been a blessing to the entire community. He did not defend himself. The Bible tells us he departed. He went on his way. He was not vindictive. He did not burn his fields on his way out of town. He did not offer an opinion or make a statement to the local press about the hostile way he was being treated. He did not try to buy his way into Philistine high society. He *disengaged*. He *let go*. He *moved on*. As our reading from I Thessalonians instructs us to do, Isaac showed respect to those who had charge of him and admonished him. He did not return evil for evil, but sought what was good.

Isaac went back toward the land of his father Abraham, but he was still a resident alien in Abimelech's kingdom. He settled in a new area. He re-dug his father's old wells, which the Philistines had plugged up, and they were still a source of life-giving water. His servants even dug new wells, new sources of spring water. Then the locals got their noses out of joint and said, "That's our water!" Notice, again, what Isaac did. He renamed the well "Esek," which means "contention," and he moved on. He dug another well, and the natives argued and quarreled over that well also, so he named it "Sitnah," which means "enmity" or "hatred." Isaac moved on yet again.

I have a theory about why we don't hear much about this chapter in Isaac's life. As Americans we are a tenacious people. We fight for our rights and we like to win. There is something about the way that Isaac keeps packing up and

moving on that makes us uncomfortable. It is certainly understandable that a child who barely escaped his father's knife would grow up to have an aversion to violence and conflict. But we don't know if we want to follow his example of disengaging, letting go, and moving on every time a bully comes along.

You could think Isaac was a three-time loser, but he persevered. He knew he was a child of God, a child of the covenant. He knew God had something better planned for him than to make nice with such disagreeable people.

Finally, Isaac and his servants dug a well, and no one quarreled with them. So Isaac named the well, "Rehoboth," saying, "*Now the Lord has made room for us and we shall be fruitful in the land.*" Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says another translation for "Rehoboth" would be "breathing space." I like that. The Hebrew word for Spirit is "Ru-ah," and it is also the word for wind, breathe, and life. We all need space to breathe, room to relax, and a place of safety where we can be fruitful and productive. As we heard the Psalmist say this morning, "I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety."

When Isaac labored to dig wells, he was seeking sustenance, and when he found a place where he could be secure in the land, he had found not only life-giving water, but life-giving room, "breathing space." *I want to suggest* to you that it seems to me this is a metaphor for what prayer gives each of us. Prayer gives us life-giving sustenance and breathing space. We all need deep wells and plenty of space to relax, unwind, and be creative. There is no end to how fruitful and productive we can be when we have breathing space. Jesus knew this. That is why he so frequently went off by himself to pray.

Bill Hybels, the Pastor of the Willow Creek Church, said in his book *Too Busy Not To Pray*, that prayer flies in the face of our American culture and work ethic. We have learned to be strong, independent, and self-sufficient. Turning to God in prayer seems like an assault on the idea that we should pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and make our own success. Bill Hybels says prayer is alien to pride, and we are proud people.

So why do we pray? We pray to connect to something beyond ourselves and beyond our human limitations. We pray because we know what it is to be in a foxhole, or face-to-face with terror or too close to tragedy. We pray because we have known heartbreak, grief, failure, and pain. We pray because when we are up against a wall we reach out to a divine presence we somehow know is there. Thomas Kelly once said, "Deep within us all there is an

amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return.”

Prayer allows God’s power to be unleashed in our lives. When Joshua and God’s people were in battle, as long as Moses hands were stretched heavenward, God’s power drove back the enemy. But when Moses put his hands down, the enemy gained ground. We have to continue in a posture of prayer for God’s power to continue to be at work in our lives.

Bill Hybels says prayer is the key that unlocks God’s power in our lives. **God is willing** to answer our prayers. As my husband, Andrew, said last week, God listens when we persist in coming to him and do not lose heart.

God is able to answer our prayers. God wants to give us the desires of our hearts. God wants us to pray without ceasing and then wait and watch for him to give us more abundantly than all we could ever ask or pray.

*Our God parted the Red Sea so his people could escape Pharaoh’s army.

*Our God caused water to flow from a rock when his people were thirsty.

God is not limited in how he is able to answer our prayers. God is the Creator of all things. He brought order out of chaos and light out of darkness, and he can do it again. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. God is still able to overcome the cross and death with the power of resurrection and new life.

God has the power to change our hearts. God was able to take Moses from tending sheep on the back side of a mountain to make him the leader of the Hebrew people, taking them out of their bondage in Egypt.

God was able to take one of Christianity’s greatest persecutors and make him one of our foremost Apostles. The Apostle Paul composed the words we read from Thessalonians today.

God invites us to come into his presence through prayer—and God invites us to stay there. We are encouraged to pray constantly, everywhere and anywhere, in season and out of season. God invites us to stay open to his presence, his blessing, his purpose, his wisdom, and his abundance.

God invites us to pray privately, to pray regularly, and to pray sincerely and to pray specifically. Jesus’ disciples asked him how they were to pray. Jesus said, “Don’t pray like the hypocrites, to be seen by people. Rather, when you pray, go into your room and close the door.”

In other words, get away from distractions and interruptions. Go to a private place where you can have regular dates with God. Create a space for

prayer. Though we are commanded to pray without ceasing, it is important to make time just to focus on prayer. My ideal places of prayer are places where there is light and warmth, where there is order and quiet and where there are no interruptions: no computers, no phones, no people. The point is to find a place where you can speak to God freely and listen for God's response. Pray from your heart.

In Richard Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline*, he says prayer is something we learn. If you don't know how to pray, Bill Hybels offers an acronym: ACTS. Christine also referred to this acronym in a recent newsletter article. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication are the elements of prayer. I put together a group of readings from the Psalms for the Lenten Season. There are some in the back of the sanctuary if you would like to use them to pray. There are instructions at the beginning of the book. But I need to warn you, the more time you spend praying and prayerfully reading God's Word, the more likely you are to be transformed by the experience.

When we pray without ceasing, we are changed and made new. Richard Foster says to pray is to change, to be transformed. Think of a caterpillar wrapping itself up in a cocoon and later emerging from its chrysalis as a butterfly. Prayer is the way we wrap ourselves up in God, to be transformed by him.

When you pray, don't focus on the problems and challenges you face. **Focus on who God is and what God is able to do.** With God we have the power to move mountains, so don't focus on the mountain, but on God's power to move it.

God is sufficient to meet all our needs. Our hope **is not and never has been** in economic stimulus packages or the Dow Jones Industrial Average or the NASDAQ. God says in Second Chronicles 7: 14: "If my people, who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

What our nation and our world need now are people who will get on their knees and pray. We need to repent of our sins. Then, and only then, will God hear us and forgive us and heal our land.

We have to ***slow down*** to make time for God and to care for our souls. We have to take time to intercede for others and for our world. We live by mantras like "time is money" and we try to cram more in—start earlier—work

later—keep ourselves connected to our phones and our computers 24/7—perform, perform, perform. We even put our children on tyrannical treadmills thinking it will give them a competitive edge, but maybe all it does is cause them to feel as exhausted as we are.

In God's reality, taking time to rest is honoring the way we have been created. In God's reality, cultivating relationships and enjoying the life we have been given helps us gain perspective. We are living in uncertain times. Uncertainty can make us feel insecure, and our insecurities can drive us to perform faster and faster to our peril. Spend time in prayer. Focus on who God is and ask God to help you. Remember, Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." God has said, "Be still and know that I am God."

Going back to Isaac, without ever having read Pauline theology, he seemed to know that *we always win* when we let love be genuine and hate what is evil, when we hold fast to what is good, when we love one another with mutual affection, when we outdo one another in showing honor and when we do not lag in zeal but remain ardent in the spirit. Isaac exemplified what it means to rejoice in hope, to be patient in suffering, and to persevere in prayer. He lived in harmony with his neighbors; he did not claim to be wiser than he was; he did not demand land and water rights. He encouraged the fainthearted and he helped the weak. He dug wells for them. He did not repay anyone evil for evil, but he did what was noble in the sight of all. When his enemies were thirsty he not only gave them something to drink, he gave them the whole darn well! He was somehow able to give thanks in trying circumstances. He embodied God's covenant promise, for he was a blessing to all.

Like Isaac, we, too, are children of Abraham. We, too, are heirs of God's promise. We, too, are blessed that we might become a blessing.

As Isaiah 40: 31 says, "Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Amen.

Benediction:

"May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this."

I Thessalonians 5: 24

