

The God Who Hears

God hears those who draw near to Him.

.....*Psalm 66: 16 – 20*.....
 "Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me. ¹⁷I cried out to Him with my mouth; His praise was on my tongue. ¹⁸If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; ¹⁹but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. ²⁰Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!"

.....*1 John 5: 13 – 15*.....
¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. ¹⁴ This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

If you have visited Facebook or use a cell phone for texting, I'm sure you're familiar with the emoji of the 'praying hands.' Whenever someone wants to express empathy or concern, they post a pair of 'praying hands' (or two or three). Based on the large number of praying emojis that people use, there must be a lot of people who trust that there is a God who hears our prayers.

Martin Luther described prayer as 'Climbing up of the heart unto God.'¹ Isn't that a beautiful mental picture? Can't you just imagine yourself, taking all of the worries and sadness of your heart, and being comforted in the lap of God? That's the kind of relationship God wants to have with you and me. The Bible tells us that God invites us to **know Him**, to **communicate with Him** and to **grow in our relationship** with Him. All of these things are made possible through prayer.

In our 'Call to Worship' this morning we heard God's promise in Psalm 34, that if we seek the LORD, He will answer. It also contains God's assurance that He is '**close to the brokenhearted**'. God promises that if we look to Him, and take '**refuge**' in Him, we will be '**delivered from all (our) fears**' and be '**radiant**.' God's invitation sounds amazing, doesn't it?

Notice, however, at the end of the reading there is a prerequisite. Who is it that the LORD hears? The '**righteous**'... The psalmist said, '**The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their cry**.' What does it mean to be '**righteous**'? It simply means to '**be right with God**.'

It's important to realize that being '**righteous**' doesn't mean being '**perfect**'. Since the beginning of the human race, there have been no perfect men or women. Christians rejoice in knowing that Jesus was born, lived, and died so that he could live a '**righteous**' life on our behalf, and make us '**righteous**' by providing his forgiveness for our sin.

What God wants from us is our devotion; a desire to honor God in every area of our life. The prophet Micah summed this up pretty well when he wrote, '**What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God**.' (Micah 6:8)

¹ Martin Luther, *Devotional Classics*, ed. Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith, (HarperSanFrancisco: 1993), 135.
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King Hezekiah was a **'righteous'** king. He made every effort to be just, and merciful and humbly obedient to God. Hezekiah was only 25 years old when he became king in Judah, the Southern Kingdom of Israel.

Despite his father, Ahaz, being atrociously *un-righteous*, Hezekiah's reign was devoted to God. In 2nd Kings, Chapter 18, we learn that Hezekiah **'did what was right in the eyes of the LORD.'** (2 Kings 18:3) Hezekiah destroyed all of places where false gods were worshipped. We are told that Hezekiah **'trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel.... He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow Him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses.... And the LORD was with him.'** (2 Kings 18: 5 – 6)

We can learn a lot about how God hears prayer by observing how God answered Hezekiah's prayers. During Hezekiah's reign, Assyria was systematically conquering the cities of Israel's Northern and Southern Kingdoms. One by one the *'fortified'* cities fell, and the Israeli citizens were deported to Assyria. When the king of Assyria reached Jerusalem, things looked pretty hopeless. King Sennacherib and the Assyrian army seemed undefeatable. When Hezekiah received a letter from the king of Assyria demanding surrender, his first response was *not* to call his advisors, nor to assemble his army; but his first response was to *pray to God*.

Hezekiah took the letter to the Temple and he **'spread (the letter) out before the LORD... and he prayed to the LORD.'** (2 Kings 18:14-15) A little while later, the prophet Isaiah told Hezekiah what God's answer to his prayer was. God told Hezekiah that the king of Assyria, **'will not enter this city.'** God said, **'I will defend this city and save it for My sake.'** (2 Kings 19:32–34)

No one could have imagined how God would work out His promise. When the people of Jerusalem got up the next morning and looked out over the wall to where the Assyrian army was camped, they saw that during the night, the **'angel of the LORD'**, had killed 185,000 of the soldiers! They were just lying there, dead. After that, King Sennacherib **'broke camp and withdrew'** from Jerusalem. He returned home to Ninevah, where he met a tragic end. (2 Kings 19: 36 – 37) The lesson of Hezekiah's prayer is *not* to pray that God kills your enemies (!) but to trust that God does answer prayer in the most unexpected ways.

In the next chapter of 2nd Kings, we learn that Hezekiah prayed to God again, this time for a different reason. Hezekiah had become ill, **'and was at the point of death.'** (2 Kings 20:1) The Prophet Isaiah came to Hezekiah to deliver a message from God about his illness. God told Hezekiah to **'put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.'**

We are told that Hezekiah, understandably distraught, **'turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD... and wept bitterly.'** (2 Kings 20:2-3) Hezekiah humbled himself before God and asked for God's mercy. He said, **'Remember O LORD, how I have walked before You faithfully with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.'**

Almost immediately, the LORD told Isaiah His answer to Hezekiah's prayer. The LORD's message was, **'I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you...I will add fifteen**

(15) years to your life.' (2 Kings 20: 4 – 6) It was kind of a *'good news'/'bad news'* kind of answer, don't you think? God added some years to Hezekiah's life, but he would still die.

God heard and answered Hezekiah's prayers. But it's important to realize that God responded to Hezekiah's prayers according to God's own will. God said both times, ***'I will do this for my sake and for the sake of my servant David.'***

We cannot know the answer why God gives some people who are seriously ill more years to live and doesn't do the same for others. While it may feel like God isn't hearing their prayers or not answering their prayers, God's love for that person is strong. God acts in ways that we cannot understand this side of Heaven, because God's way of thinking is not at all the same as ours.

I always think of God's answer to Jesus when he was praying to his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was distraught, and ***'in anguish'*** at the thought of the torture that lay ahead of him, and he asked God to spare him from death. Remember what Jesus said to God at that moment? He said, ***'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.'*** (Luke 22: 42) We know, don't we, that God didn't answer Jesus' prayer in the way Jesus had hoped. Yet God loved him and sent ***'an angel from Heaven... to strengthen him.'***

In *The Always God*, Jarrett Stephens summarizes three (3) necessary things to be sure God hears and answers our prayers: **PROXIMITY, POSTURE** and **PERSPECTIVE**.

PROXIMITY- First, we must be close to God. James, the brother of Jesus, told us in the Bible, ***'Come near to God and He will come near to you.'*** (James 4:8)

If we live our life on our own terms, rejecting God's commandments, we are making the choice to live separated from Him. When we choose to honor God in our lives, and make the effort to know Him, through Bible study and prayer, God will ***'come close'*** to us.

Just like Hezekiah, we should strive to have a faithful, trusting, honest relationship with God. The author of Hebrews encourages us to ***'draw near to God with a sincere heart,'*** with an attitude of respect and the desire to honor God. (Hebrews 10:22) We are privileged to have God invite us into an intimate, personal relationship with Him.

POSTURE- Some people stand to pray, others sit. Some kneel and some people put their face to the floor. Some people pray with eyes open, others with eyes closed. The *'posture'* that God cares most about is not any of these things, but instead, God is concerned with the attitude of our hearts.

It's important that we pray to God with both praise and humility. In the Bible we learn that ***'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'*** (1 Peter 5:5; Proverbs 3:34) Hezekiah was brokenhearted when he realized he would not get better from his illness and he humbled himself before God's will.

Broken people are usually humble people because they have come to accept that they cannot help themselves and that God is their only hope. Remember Psalm 34, ***'The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.'***

PRIDE separates us from God because pride comes from UNBELIEF in the sovereignty of God and leads to honoring ourselves instead of God. PRIDE also compels us to treat God as if He is obligated to grant our wishes. We don't understand Who God really is if we approach God with a 'to-do' list of demands.

Continued DISOBEDIENCE to God also separates us from Him. Our reading today from Psalm 66 warns us: ***'If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened'***. That's why it's a good idea before we pray to ask God to reveal to us anything we are doing that offends Him, so that we can stop doing what we shouldn't do and ask for God's forgiveness.

Jesus also made clear that we must FORGIVE others if we want God to hear our prayer and forgive us. He said, ***'Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in Heaven may forgive you your sins.'*** (Mark 11:25)

PERSPECTIVE- The last attitude helps us focus our prayers on God's will. We can ask God to intervene in a certain way, but ultimately, we must be prepared to accept God's decision. We may not like what God allows, but we can always trust God to provide what we need.

I have a paperweight that is a reminder that God promises to never forsake us or leave us, even in the midst of our darkest valleys. It says, ***'Pray, Trust, Wait.'*** We can always TRUST that God answers our PRAYERS and that we can WAIT in His love, which never fails.

I close with a story that demonstrates that God will honor the prayer of anyone who comes to Him in humility, truly seeking to know Him. Sundar Singh lived in India, and was a Sadhu, which is a holy man in the Hindu religion. When his mother died, he became despondent and raged at God, lashing out in particular against the Christian God. He became so distraught and hopeless that he decided to end his life. He prayed, *'Oh God, if there be a God, reveal yourself to me tonight.'*²²

He waited, privately praying in his room, for seven (7) hours. Fifteen minutes before he planned to carry out his suicide, Jesus suddenly appeared to Sundar in *'a bright cloud of light'*. Sundar had expected one of the Hindu gods would answer his prayer; definitely not Jesus.

Jesus spoke to Sundar in Hindustani, and asked, *'How long are you going to persecute me?'* (Remember Jesus said something similar to Saul on the Road to Damascus) Jesus then said to Sundar, *'You were praying to know the right way; why don't you take it? I am the Way.'*

After his encounter with Jesus, Sundar's life was transformed. He became a powerful Christian missionary who traveled village to village, telling people about the God who heard and answered his prayer.

God promises to ***'hear'*** all those who humbly ***'seek Him.'*** Aren't we so blessed to have such a good and gracious God!? Amen.

²² Sadhu Sundar Singh, *Devotional Classics*, ed. Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith, (HarperSanFrancisco: 1993), 308.
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