PSALM 141: Prevailing in Prayer

Well, I hope you’ve enjoyed our study in Psalms. It’s a book that, quite frankly, I hadn’t studied much before other than a little bit in seminary. So the last couple of months have been a blessing to me personally as I prepared the lessons each week. I gained fresh insights. I learned a lot. This morning we’ll be in Psalm 141, another of David’s many psalms, and then next week we’ll wrap up our time in Psalms with Psalm 42. In September we’ll begin a study in Exodus and we will pass out those quarterlies next week.

The Jews referred to Psalms as the “Book of Praises.” As we have mentioned before it was the hymnal of the Jews. The word “Psalm” means a song sung to musical accompaniment. So Psalms is, in a real sense, a wonderful manual for worship, but also for prayer. Psalm 141, for example, teaches us how to pray. In it we see several qualities of an effective prayer. Prayer is, by definition, “communication with God.” We were made in the image of God for the primary purpose of fellowship with Him. God wants us to talk to Him, and we do this thru prayer.

I’ve entitled today’s lesson, “Prevailing in Prayer.” Let’s be honest – most of the time that we spend in prayer is laying out before God some need that we have. Petition. We want God’s wisdom in a particular matter, His direction, His healing, His power, His help. So it is important to us that our prayers be successful, that we prevail in prayer. D.L. Moody wrote a well-known book entitled “Prevailing Prayer: What Hinders It.” Just out of curiosity I looked on line and found no less than 15 books written in the last 30 years that had either “Prevailing Prayer” or “Prevailing in Prayer” as part of the title. I’m sure there are more than that, but that’s how many I saw. It’s an important subject and it is pertinent to our lives. We know the Bible talks about the importance of prayer. Jesus taught His disciples how to pray. The Bible contains many examples of prayer, both in the O.T. and N.T. Paul instructs us to “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). James tells us that “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16). David in Psalm 141 tells us how we can prevail in our prayer lives, how our prayers can be more effective, have more power. David, despite all of his flaws, is referred to as a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14) and one who found favor in God’s sight (Acts 7:46). David communicated effectively with God. He prevailed in prayer. He knew how to pray and so we can learn from him.

READ Title and Psalm 141:1-2

We don’t know for certain what the background to this psalm is. Some scholars say it was written during the period when David was fleeing from Saul, but we don’t really know for sure. What we do get from these verses is that David is burdened. There is a sense of desperation in his voice… “O LORD, I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you!” David is crying out to God. There’s an intensity, a passion, a sense of urgency in his tone. He needs desperately for God to hear him. He must be heard.

Do your prayers have this kind of passion? When you approach holy God in prayer is there the sense that if He doesn’t come thru, it won’t get done? I believe David calls out to God as his one and only hope. Abraham Lincoln once said, “I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.” We shouldn’t go to God as our last resort, but we should go to Him first. Frequently as I read thru the psalms of David I see a sense of desperation in David’s prayers – “Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation” (Ps 38:22); “O Lord make haste to help me!” (Ps 40:13, 70:1); “You are my help and deliverer, do not delay, O my God!” (Ps 40:17, 70:5); “Save me, O God!” (Ps 69:1). So there is a sense of urgency as David calls upon the Lord. “God, I need your help desperately!”

And it’s no different here in Psalm 141 as David calls out to God.

Now, there are a couple of things about prayer in verse 2 that we need to take note of. David describing his prayer as incense before God is a reference to the golden altar of incense where the priests would burn fragrant incense to God every morning and every evening in the Holy Place. The golden altar of incense sat in front of the curtain, the veil, which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies (both in the tabernacle and then later in the temple). You can read about this in Exodus 30. *[Show picture of priest offering the incense to God in temple]*

The incense was a symbol of the prayers and intercession of the people rising up to God as a sweet fragrance. And just as the incense was offered up to the Lord regularly, twice daily, so prayer should be a regular part of our lives. Just as the burning of incense was an act of worship, something which God derived pleasure from, so our prayers are an act of worship. By the way, this isn’t just an O.T. thing. Did you know the N.T. mentions this also? Revelation 5:8: “And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” That same idea is repeated in Revelation 8:3-4: “And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.” Our prayers as the saints of God offered up to God as a sweet smelling aroma – what a beautiful picture! Have you ever looked at your prayers that way? You see, in a real sense, our prayers are an act of worship.

READ Psalm 141:3-4

Notice in David’s prayer that he makes petition to God for himself. There is nothing wrong with that. Especially if you know you have a problem and you’re seeking God’s help with it. What was David’s issue? His speech for one – v 3 “Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!” James 3:8 tells us that “no human being can tame the tongue.” We need God to do that for us, don’t we? David not only needed God to guard his mouth but also his thoughts – v 4 “Do not let my heart incline to any evil.” This gets to the issue of what’s on the inside, in our heart, in our mind. Jesus said, “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). God needs to control my mouth and my heart, your mouth and your heart.

But there’s one other area that David knew he was vulnerable in, and that was the influence of people, those around him. You know, to some degree we can control who we’re around, who are friends are and who we hang out with. But sometimes we can’t control who we are around, who we cross paths with as we go about our busy everyday lives, who we are forced to associate with on the job. David was a high profile leader who eventually became the king and out of necessity had to associate with all sorts of people, some good and some bad. And people can have an influence on you, can’t they? *[comment in your own experience how people adversely impact you]*

Here David’s request to God is, “Don’t let me be influenced to do evil.” This verse reminds me of that part of the Lord’s Prayer where Jesus prays, “and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” There is absolutely nothing wrong with asking God to help us where we know we are weak and where we might be tempted, areas in which we struggle. And that is what David is doing here. He says, “Let me not eat of their delicacies.” This a reference to the temptations that the world offers – as the song says, “all the vain things that charm me most.” A major part of our prayer life should be to seek God’s protection from ourselves, from those areas where we are most vulnerable to Satan’s snares. Certainly we know that if we sin that we can confess our sins, be cleansed and have our fellowship with God restored…But we are so much better off if we don’t sin at all. So just be honest with God and ask Him to help you in those areas where you struggle the most. Andrew Murray said it best: “Sometime prayer changes me more than it changes the circumstances.”

READ Psalm 141:5

*[Reminder that chapter and verse divisions are not inspired. The last sentence in v 5 really connects better with verses 6 and 7]*

The bottom line of what David is saying in this verse is this: “Lord, whatever it takes to cause me to be more godly, more in line with your will, send it my way, even if it isn’t pleasant.” That’s not an easy thing to pray, is it? Sometimes I need a harsh rebuke, being struck, by a righteous man, like David mentions here – it is a kindness, it is a good thing. Often we need to hear that tough word, that reproof from a friend, a spouse, a boss, a pastor’s message. “Lord, help me to hear it and accept it where it applies.” That’s what David prays. “Make me teachable. Let my head not refuse it.” Proverbs 15:31 says, “The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.” Proverbs 17:10 says, “A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.” We grow, we mature, we become wiser as we prayerfully consider the reproof of others.

“It is oil for my head” – it’s what I need. It brings spiritual refreshment. David prays that God will make him the man of God he needs to be.

READ Psalm 141:end of v 5, 6-7

This is a difficult passage to understand. David prays with spiritual discernment against the wicked deeds of those who are seeking to cause harm. This is what we call an “imprecatory” psalm, calling upon God to curse or judge an evildoer. David penned a lot of imprecatory psalms. David had a lot of enemies and his enemies in many cases were God’s enemies (Ps 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 109, 140 – David is especially harsh against his false accusers in Ps 109: “May his days be few; may another take his office! May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow! May his children wander about and beg, seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit!” Here in Psalm 141 David specifically that the leaders of evil be destroyed – v 6, “thrown over the cliff.” David prays that God will restrain the evildoers. He can’t do it himself. He may not even be aware of all that’s happening or who all the bad people are. But as a leader of God’s people, David prays that God will intervene and deal with them as He sees fit. By the way, we ought to pray this way as well. We should pray against those who oppose God and His divine truth, those engaged in evil activity. And we, like David, need to be discerning when we pray such prayers.

Verse 7 is a difficult verse to understand. Perhaps David feels as though he is close to death. He may, in fact be overwhelmed by his own mortality.

READ Psalm 141:8-10

David closes with his focus squarely upon God. He is not focusing on his own circumstances. He’s fully trusting in God, relying on Him. It is in God that David takes refuge. “God, don’t leave me vulnerable to my enemies.” Verses 9-10 offer us a strong clue as to some of the specific circumstance surrounding David’s prayer: there are apparently some people out there who are plotting against David. And David asks God to protect him from those people. “Let their evil plots backfire on them. Let them reap what they sow. Let them fall into their own traps.” As I read this I thought of the people who schemed against Daniel and got him thrown into the lion’s den. I also thought of that evil man Haman in the book of Esther who tried to get righteous Mordecai killed. Their evil schemes backfired on them, didn’t they? Daniel’s enemies ended up being thrown to the lions and perished. Haman was hung on his own gallows. God’s judgment on evil!

In closing we can learn a lot about prevailing in prayer from David. Pray with a sense of urgency, completely depending on God to accomplish whatever it is we’re praying about. Pray understanding that God really does want to hear from you. Pray with the full knowledge that you are a sinner saved by grace. Ask God to set a guard over your mouth, your thoughts and your actions. Ask Him to protect you from yourself, restrain you from evil around you. Ask Him to do whatever it takes for you to be yielded to His will for your life. Be discerning, but pray against evil.

There is no set formula for prayer. We’re all unique individuals. Go boldly before the throne of grace, be yourself. Confess your sins first and then pray humbly, honestly, and expectantly. As God brings needs to your mind, when problems arise, pray about them. Talk to God about them. He wants to hear from you!

We’re going to sing a great hymn about prayer. It’s my wife’s favorite hymn: “What a friend we have in Jesus.”