

First Presbyterian Church
“Patience in Prayer” 2 Samuel 7:1-14a
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/21/2024

Nothing is more fundamental to our faith than prayer.

Martin Luther said, "To be a Christian without prayer
is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."

Prayer is connection to our Creator, our Savior, our Source, our Provider,
and through it we are changed and the world is changed ...
but how? and when?

Why does God provide what is requested in some prayers but not in others?

Is there a trick to asking the right way?

Or are we just blinded by confirmation bias,
seeing God’s hand when things go as we ask
but blaming sinful forces when they don’t?

All prayer is good prayer, because even when we pray wrongly,
we are attending to God,
and God can meet us and change us in the encounter.

However, there are two characteristics that will save us
from a lot of confusion in prayer: patience and openness.

When we pray with patience that God will act on God’s own time schedule,
and with openness that God will provide us and others what is needed
rather than what is desired,

then we will avoid the prayer trap
which King David fell into:

You see, David thought he could tell God what God needed.

(But don’t worry, God was gracious to David,
and will be gracious to us, too, when we fall into the same trap.)

2 Samuel chapter 7 is part of a message sent by God to the prophet Nathan
who is to report the message to King David.

This is the kind of explicit verbal response to prayer
that we very rarely get, so we can learn a lot from it.

David initiated this conversation with God by saying to Nathan,
“How can I live in this beautiful cedar house
when God remains in a tent!” (A conversation / prayer)

The gist of it is that David who has just recently become King of Israel,
wants to build a temple for Yahweh. Which sounds great, right?
But listen to how God replies to David in verse 5,
“**Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?**”

David’s prayer was narrow and hurried.
He thought God needed to get out of the tabernacle,
and now is the time to build a temple.
He thought God, as God’s chosen king, that he would be the perfect person
to build something better.

Think of the thing you truly believe God wants different in the world.
So often I pray like this:
“God *this* is the situation that I know you want to be different,
and so help me, God, *now* is the time that I’m going to fix it ...
for your sake, Lord! Not for my sake, of course,
but for your sake.”
Do you pray like that, too?

When we pray without patience and openness, it is easy to mistake
my will for *thy will*. We don’t do this maliciously, it just slips in there.

To that very point, it’s important for us to get some background
on what building a temple meant to people
living in the year 1000 BC.

For ancient peoples, their god, their king, and their temple
were very closely related.
Kings would often build elaborate temples
in order to *obligate* a particular god
to endorse their dynasty.

For example, here’s an actual quote inscribed
on a Babylonian temple to a god named Marduk.

“O Marduk, my lord, look joyously at my pious work! By your noble command that will never be changed, may the work of my hand last forever. As the bricks of this temple are firm forever, establish the foundation of my throne for all time to come.”

So the Babylonian king builds the temple in hopes
that he can be assured blessing through the building.
He’s trying to manipulate his god through building a temple.

We do that, too! We say, “O Lord, we work so hard in your name,
we serve so many hours, we’ve given so much money,
we run such great programs for you.
As our fellowship hour coffee is strong,
so make our ministry strong for years to come!”

If we’re honest, sometimes we expect God to do good things for us
because of what we have done for God. Is that patience and openness?

Well, Yahweh, the God of Israel is not like these other gods.
Yahweh will not be controlled. So the Lord says,
“David, are you the one to build *my* house?”
And in the passage that follows Yahweh turns the tables.
First David’s story is recounted.

**“I took you from tending the flock and appointed you
as ruler over Israel.”**

God is saying, “I have been with you your whole life
– before you did anything!”

Then instead of David building a house for God,
God says this in verse 11, **“The Lord declares to you that
the Lord himself will establish a house...for you.”**

In this prayer exchange, God takes David’s prayer requests and flips it over:
You’re not building my house, I will build your house,
and you will be obligated to me!

Here David’s “house” means the dynasty of David’s lineage
as the rulers of Israel.

David’s relationship to Yahweh was close, but David had to remember
who directed the action. And David could not earn favor with God.

He would only get Yahweh's blessing by having faith
in the promise, just like Abraham and Sarah did.

This lesson was soon forgotten in Israel.

Later, when David's son, Solomon,
does build a temple for Yahweh,
people looked at that building and said,
"Wow, God is *really* on our side now.
We have built the temple of Yahweh!
God is on our team, big time."

The prophet Jeremiah spoke out against this sense of assurance
that God is with Israel just because of the temple.

Listen to Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 3 and 4:

3This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:

**Reform your ways and your actions,
and I will let you live in this place.**

4Do not trust in deceptive words and say,

**"This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD,
the temple of the LORD!"**

It really says it three times. The point all throughout the Old Testament
is that Israel doesn't get God's favor because
they are outwardly God's people.

They get God's favor when they accept God's promises by faith inwardly,
and wait for God patiently, open to whatever God may do—or not do.

Do you come to God with patience and openness?

Or do you come with a sense that "after all I've done for you,
you kind of owe me this one"?

Esther De Waal wrote a wonderful book on Benedictine Spirituality
called *Lost in Wonder*. She writes a lot about Thomas Merton,
who remains a tremendous figure
in modern American spirituality.

She says that Merton "insisted that while there was a need for effort,
deepening, and transformation it was most important
not to undertake any special project of self-transformation
or some attempt to 'work on myself.'"

Rather, Merton said 'just go for walks, live in peace,
let change come quickly and invisibly on the inside.'"

What a different perspective.

Rather than seeing prayer as a means to completing a project
in ourselves or in the world, we simply pray to be at peace
and let God do what God will do in God's own time.

Getting back to 2 Samuel chapter 7, the highpoint comes in verse 16.

God says to David, "**Your house and your kingdom
will endure forever before me;
your throne will be established forever.**"

Wow...so even though God said no to the big thing David wanted,
God had a blessing planned that was much, much better than that.

For the rest of Israel's history,
the blessing God gives to line of David
is central to how they think politically
and central to how they think theologically.

This is why we have so many promises about a new King,
a new Anointed One that will come along that will be like David.
God's Messiah, his Anointed One who will save Israel
from their sins will be one in the line of David.

The blessing given in this passage ultimately leads to Jesus.
David could *never* have thought of asking for something like that.
We don't build God's house, God builds our house.

Now I want to be clear: God wants us to ask for things.
God wants us to be honest about what we desire in prayer.
But when we ask we should ask openly and patiently.

Think again about the thing that you want to be different in your life,
or in the world.

Is it possible that God knows you need something else
even more than the thing you are asking for?

That God is prepared to give you or your community
something even better?

The better house that God had in mind was the human heart.

God's Spirit is in us and with us. And the Spirit invites us to dinner,
[*gesture at communion table*] so that we can be a people united
around the world at the table of Jesus, the Son of David.

No matter what we go through in life, no matter what we suffer,

God does have something better for us:
eternal life in Christ, harmony with God and all of creation.

During this time of communion, consider your hopes and dreams:

for yourself; for the church; for what you wish God would do.

As you consider these things, I invite you to tell God
that while you greatly desire these outcomes,
you are willing to be patient and open
for what God has in store.