

“The Prayer Closet”

March 11, 2012

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

1. **Steve and Carol Lyons in Tanzania:** Steve will have discernment in dealing with the men in training; the young men will gain a new understanding of Jesus and a burden for others; that all will be salt and light in their communities; they Lyons will enjoy good health and full financial as well as prayer support
2. **President Obama:** the Spirit will lead him away from the wisdom of men to the wisdom of God; the Lord will impart courage to adopt new ways of thinking and acting; The Father will give him a father’s true heart for his daughters
3. **Oroville Christian School:** the Spirit will bring faculty and students into close bonds of friendship and respect; the Lord will bless the school with peace amongst the constituency and a powerful influence for faith and righteousness in school families
4. **Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: Cody Henneker, Private, US Army** (grandson of Dick and Jane Miller):
5. **Young Adult of the Week: Kim Peterson at Butte College** (daughter of Tom and Sue Peterson):

The title for today’s message is “Bread”, and if you are following the study of John’s Gospel the sixth chapter you know that it centers on the topic of bread. That is why we are looking at it. We are going to be looking at John 6:41-59.

Before we get there I would appreciate your turning there. Last week the message came from the preceding section, John 6:35-40 and emphasized the grace of God. I wrestled with my mind as to whether or not I should do this. This morning I had a lovely illustration of God’s grace. Some of you who were in the kitchen know this. I was standing innocently in the kitchen. I’m just standing there and all of a sudden out of nowhere comes a cup of coffee with cream. It falls [on my coat] and all the way down my leg. So the first act of grace was that the Lord kept my mouth shut, so that I made no comment whatsoever other than saying “Oh!” Then, being “filthified” – and those of us at the men’s study on Wednesday nights know that Joshua the High Priest stands before the Lord and he is just filthy, and you think, “Well, that’s a problem; and it is a problem.” So then [I] quickly grabbed a dry towel and wiped it all down; and literally, it is all gone. What I thought was, “What an illustration of the power of instant repentance for sin.” When you find that suddenly through some action or thought that you have become defiled with sin, don’t give it time to soak in and leave a stain. God to the Lord at once and say, “O man, forgive me, and let me again by Your grace be clean.”

So the grace of God: this is central to us, this is how we live; this is what we breathe day by day. Last week we talked about this and in order to appreciate the centrality of grace to the character of God, we emphasized that God delights in saving sinners. And the balance to that is that He takes no pleasure in the death or the punishment of the wicked. He will do it, of course He must! Putting those two together, it is the counsel of wisdom that we would pray to the Father that the Father will empower or enable us to receive faith in Jesus Christ. Maybe you are struggling with that. Ask the Father to help you.

Turning to verses 41-59 today, we see that the Jews stubbornly resist what Jesus has to say. This is significant as you go through this entire chapter. If you are there with me we will read verses 41-59.

So the Jews grumbled about Jesus because He had said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They said, “Is this not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, “I have come down from heaven”? Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

Here we see the Jews respond with grumbling. This grumbling occurs in spite of all they have already experience with Jesus: His healings, His teachings, and most recently the feeding of the great multitude that probably numbered around seven to eight thousand people. Did you ever think about that? What amazing people these Jews are! You and I have to rely on reading this book in order to have all of these evidences set in front of us. That can be a struggle at times. They are written down and we wrestle with how accurate it is: did they get it straight; did the translators get it straight? We wrestle with those questions. These people experienced all these things straight on, and [yet] they grumbled! They grumble, not liking, I suppose, what they have heard. In the 42nd verse John gives the reason for their grumbling, or at least he gives their self-justification for their grumbling. They say they reject Jesus’ big claims regarding Himself as the Bread of Life coming down from heaven because they “know”. — you have to understand the way that sentence was written: “They know that he was born and raised by Joseph and Mary in Nazareth.” In the grammar of that sentence the “we” is emphatic, so it’s like this, “Well, we know! We, we have the information; we have the straight scoop!” Notice what the scoop is as to why they are not going to pay attention to Jesus. What do they claim to know? They claim to know that His mom and dad, Joseph and Mary, raised Him in Nazareth. They know that already. That is what they claim they know. But this is disingenuous. Scripture does not carry the story, but there is plenty of information in extra-biblical sources which do, that it was, as a matter of fact, “common knowledge”, everybody “knew” that Joseph wasn’t His father. So on the one hand we hear them grumbling and making a claim, “We don’t have to pay attention to this guy because we know who is mom and dad were,” but on the other hand at other times they “know” He’s illegitimate. When you study through and you follow you begin to see, “Maybe facts for these people are not stable and steady. Maybe facts are adaptable to their preference.” Another and easily overlooked element to their assertion, one scarcely less damaging to their credibility, has to do with a rather different aspect of Jesus’ life. How many have dealt with a sinless person? Think about it. What would it be like to deal with someone who was literally without sin, morally perfect? I would probably want to hightail it! In the presence of such compassionate, consistent perfection of judgment and insight I would feel horribly exposed. I would feel that my personal flaws, my quick resort to the quick comment, my tendency towards sarcasm: how long would it take for me to say, “Uh oh, here comes...!” How would I begin to talk with others about this man who makes me feel so uncomfortable about myself? As I have said before it is necessary to come to the scriptures with the full use of your imagination and to enter in as much as you possibly can to the experience that must have been theirs, that is what you want to do, always letting the Word control and limit what you have to say and conclude.

Before we quickly condemned these grumblers we should reflect, haven’t we done the same thing? Who of us has not rejected someone’s appearance or reputation for virtue by questioning their motives, claiming to know the truth about their past that would belie what they claim about themselves today? In other words, picking and choosing what we remember in order to cast a shadow over their appearance of goodness. Beloved, that is common human behavior. So rather than adopting a lofty position looking down our nose at these incompetent and small minded and narrow hearted Jews who grumbled about Jesus, we ought to say of ourselves, “I wonder how close I stand to the place where they stood?” and reflect on the people who are around me and the people whose lives I have touched and perhaps I have bruised and wounded over time and say to myself, “God have grace and mercy on me and grant to me strength to attend to matters wherein Your grace is needed to heal wounded hearts.

In verses 43-44, responding to the tacit, the unstated claim by these Jews that they know too much to be fooled — this is what they are claiming — they know too much to be fooled by His big claim to be coming down from heaven, Jesus now tells them that the ability to come to Him, that is, to accept the authority and the truth of what He has to say, this ability is beyond their natural powers. In verses 43-44 what does he say? He says, “*Jesus answered them, ‘Do not grumble among yourselves; no one can come to me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.’*” So this ability is given from the Father. People at this point quickly conclude that Jesus has drawn a closed circle regarding the path of salvation. To approach and know the Father you must know and believe in Jesus; but to

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know and believe in Jesus, you must already have dealings with, that is you must approach and know the Father. But that is not actually what Jesus says. The two sides here are not equal. It is not a round circle. What He said is that no one can come by faith to Jesus unless the Father draws them. There are some assumptions here. Jesus assumes that everybody knows God is. That assumption is throughout the entirety of scripture. All people know that there is God. What they don't know is about Jesus. They do not understand, even when they hear about Jesus, that God sent His Son to die for their sin. Wisdom therefore says, pray to the Father. “I don't get this Christian stuff.” Pray to the Father, for it is the Father who draws those who will believe to the Son.

Jesus follows the statement in verse 44 by repeating the astounding claim that He had made earlier that He is the One who will raise people on the last day. In this we hear the echo of Jesus earlier assertion that the Father has given all judgment to the Son. You can see that in chapter 5:22 and 26-27. This is what He said, *“The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son. . . For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.”*

At this point when you read through the text I hope that your text illustrates to you that Jesus is actually appealing to an Old Testament verse. That verse, in verse 45, is a reference to Isaiah 54:13. I am going to ask you to be thinking about Isaiah and I am going to ask you eventually to turn to the 53rd chapter. What is it that is told us, what does Isaiah 54:13 say? Well he puts it right there: *“They will all be taught of God.”* That is the statement that Jesus picks out from that prophetic passage. If we look at the fuller statement, this is the fuller context, verses 44-45 of John 6. *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they will all be taught of God.’”* Then Jesus goes on to say, *“Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me.”* Those who come to Jesus are those who have heard and learned from the Father. What is the reasonable application of that statement? Pray to the Father.

Why am I doing this? I am doing this because I have never heard anybody give this emphasis in the area of evangelism and the salvation of souls to the role of the Father for salvation. But I am living in a culture that is spiritually dying, and one of the reasons it is dying is that it has forgotten Who the Father is. You and I are called by our God to bow before Him, to praise worship and adore Him, and to lay out all of our hopes; and if you are not praying for somebody who is lost, you are not listening to the Father, for the Father delights to save sinners and takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

If we hear the Father speaking hear, what do we learn? This would be Isaiah 54:13. At this point we come to the rule of context in our seeking to rightly interpret or understand scripture. The same was true of the Jews; you look at the context of any particular statement in order that you would rightly understand what that statement is trying to say to us. The Jews also used context in order to properly understand a citation from some other work. No doubt the Jews had various conventions and traditions and rules of thumb which they used. We do the best we can in the absence of knowing all of those. Where do we find Isaiah 54:13? Don't tell me in Isaiah! The important point is that we find this in the last third of the book [of Isaiah]. More specifically you find this after chapter 40. If you have ever done a thorough reading let alone a close study and examination of the prophet Isaiah you know that there is a huge change in the way the prophet presents God's truth at verse 40. Most of chapters 1-39, not all but most of that is a case of reciting the sins and the failures of Israel and the sins and failures of everybody else and God saying gotch ya, gotch ya, gotch ya, because you won't be obedient and faithful and so I gotch ya: judgment. But as we read in our call to worship this morning when you come to the 40th chapter there is suddenly a change. That change is so profound in the Hebrew that the vast majority of liberal scholars say Isaiah couldn't even have written that, it must have been written by another person. Well, they are wrong, but it helps you and me to understand just how huge a shift there is.

How does that section begin? “*Comfort, comfort My people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hands double for all her sins.*” Any parent here should identify with this. What do you do after you have sternly reprimanded and disciplined a child? You must reestablish contact. You must reach out and embrace them. You want to comfort and reassure them. You want them to know that the acts of discipline are not an act of rejection; they are instead an expression of your love for that child. So you embrace that child and you speak words of tenderness and comfort and reassurance, calling them back into the relationship so they can draw strength from your love for them. That is exactly what God is doing here in dealing with Israel.

There is more: when you follow on from chapter 40 and begin at 45 through 49 you are exposed to what all scholars agree are the most eloquent, profound and beautiful descriptions of the singular sovereignty, majesty and power of God. There is no place where you will ever read a description of God that equals what you find in Isaiah chapters 40-45. Then, after he gives this amazing description of the majesty and power of God, he immediately turns and in chapters 49-53 he gives to us what are called the Suffering Servant Messages. Now what he says is, this majestic, powerful, awesome God has a special servant, and that special servant suffers for Israel, His people. After that is done, chapter 54, that is where we want to go to, chapter 54 is the context of v. 13. This is how it begins: “*Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married, says the Lord. Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities.*”

Reflect for a moment: have you ever found yourself desolate, feeling sterile, useless, broken because of sin? Have you ever sat in a particular place within the context of a body of believers and looked around and said to yourself, “The Lord’s blessing rests on that one, the Lord’s blessing rests on that one, the Lord’s blessing rests on that one, the prosperity of God’s goodness has come that house, the prosperity of God’s goodness has come to that house, and my house is desolate”? Then you hear the renewing word of God’s grace, “Sing, O barren one, sing, for the blessings of God will come!”

That is the context of the verse that Jesus chooses, chapter 54:13. The context of chapter 54:13 is full of hope, it is full of promise; it is filled with the glad affirmation of God’s gracious intervention for the well-being of His people. Here were the very words of God indicating the high and privileged place of the Jews which God will secure to them. Who is Jesus talking to? He is talking to the Jews! He cites these promises, this marvelous expression of the grace and goodness and restoring that will come to them from God. All this would have been known by the Pharisees in particular for these chapters in Isaiah were cherished by them as the certainty of the restoration of the nation to preeminence in the world. That was their confidence, they leaned in that direction. What Jesus said to these Jews was therefore of the utmost importance to them. If they were at all sober minded it should have made them more sober minded than at any other time in their lives. How many times when you read the gospels do hear that Jesus says this: and the kingdom of heaven has come to you; and the kingdom of God has touched you? How would that have resounded in their ears? The kingdom for which they longed! Remember that they are living under the heel of Rome. Jesus is saying that those who will participate in the glorious fulfillment of God’s promises for Israel are those who are taught by God and then goes on to say that those who are taught by God will come to him.

Let me pause for a moment here and ask, do I need to draw an application? Is it not obvious that this is directed to us as well? Isaiah 54:13 is in the nature of an invitation. Jesus is speaking to rational people. They are mentally competent people. They can understand these words; they are acquainted with the scriptures. They know the

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history of God’s dealings [with Israel]; they also know the failings of God’s people, themselves, the Jews. They can understand what He is saying, and what He is saying is that the Father, it is the Father, who teaches people that all His promises come through personal faith in Jesus. That is what the Father teaches. Let me apply it to us. Are you and I willing to listen? Are we willing to listen to the Father?

You may think, “You are being so repetitive, pastor John!” That is right, I am. Do you know why I am so repetitive? It is because you are so dense. Let me explain that: not here [in the head or mind]; but here [in the heart]. The reason I know you’re dense is because I know the condition of my heart. I know how resistant the heart is to the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. We are so good at ducking and diving and maneuvering and shifting our ground and finding other matters to think about and so avoid taking necessary action.

Later on, coming down to the 47th verse, later on in his conversation with Martha, the sister of Mary and the sister more importantly of Lazarus – you may know, even if you are not particularly [familiar with the Gospel of John], that later Jesus raises a man named Lazarus from the dead. That man had two sisters, Martha and Mary. He is in a conversation with Martha before He has raised Lazarus from the dead. It is recorded for us in John 11:17-24. We know from that conversation recorded by John between Jesus and Martha, the Jews believed in a final resurrection of the faithful from the dead. So a resurrection was not news to the Jews. Somebody asked me about this lately. They believed in a resurrection; they were convinced of that. Not all of them. The Sadducees didn’t believe it; but the Pharisees did; they anticipated a resurrection at the end of the age. Presumably this would be the entrance point to an eternal existence of peace and joy. That is the confidence that Martha has in the contemplation of her brother’s death. But Jesus corrects her. What He says is that the entrance point to eternal life comes through faith in Him, that He is that access point, and there is no other.

The teaching by Jesus which follows regarding Himself as the bread of life, that is the bread of life which is eternal life, must be kept in mind. Both Jesus and His listeners understood perfectly well that He is not talking about actual flesh and blood. They know that, they are not dumb, at least not this way. The bread from heaven would be that nourishment of the soul that would qualify it for eternal life. Furthermore Jesus is saying that He is the only one who is authorized to dispense that life, that bread.

When in verse 49 Jesus says that the fathers died in the wilderness, the fathers who ate the manna, those Jews would have instantly recognized ambiguity, a this and a that. Why would they have [seen] an ambiguity; because there are two distinct generations that go through the wilderness. We often forget this: two distinct generations go through the wilderness: two very different groups. There was the older generation of the faithless ones. These were the ones who made the golden calf. These were the ones who came up to the border of the land, sent out ten spies and said, “There isn’t any way we are going to be able to conquer that land.” And God said to them: “That’s fine. There ain’t no way you’re getting in. You will die to the man of you in the wilderness.” That was the one generation. The other generation was the generation of their faithful children who followed Joshua across the Jordan River. In terms of the Exodus it was the first and faithless generation that died even though they ate the manna. Jesus contrasts Himself with that manna. The manna, He said, that they ate did exactly nothing for them. It was not sufficient to save them.

From our perspective this side of the cross of Jesus the statements that He makes in verses 48-51 that He is the living bread and that one must eat of His flesh if they would have eternal life make ready sense. We know full well what He is talking about. We eat that flesh and we drink that blood by placing faith in His death on the Cross and His resurrection from the grave. That is what we did last week in celebrating communion. Through His sinless life and voluntary death Jesus fully honors and preserves the justice of God’s holiness. It is critical for us to remember this. In our understanding of God it is essential that none of His attributes would be forgotten or neglected, none,

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neither His justice nor His mercy. The great passage that I would encourage you to put to memory is Exodus 34:6-7. Notice, “Exodus”, how early in the revelations given to us by the Father. This is what is written: *“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. . .”* The vast majority of people put a period right there and go no further. The minute they do that they turn God into an idol, a misrepresentation of who He truly is, because this is the rest of His own self-description: *“...but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generations.”* Whereupon you and I should instantly say, “O Lord, have mercy on me and my children, for I am a sinner, and I listen to the Father and I run to Jesus.”

For the Jews Jesus’ words present the double difficulty of human sacrifice, forbidden by the Law, and the eating of blood, forbidden by the Law. So you would think that in the face of a godly man like Jesus, who has obviously performed miracle after miracle, that an outrageous statement which is in direct contradiction to the Word of God: how would you expect them to respond? How about [something] like: “Jesus, what do you mean by this?” But how did they respond? [Series of inarticulate noises are made.] Why do I talk like that? Because sin is irrational, and leaps to its self-defense, throws up a wall to silence the rational voice of God. You can read verses 52-59 for yourself. We will look at the way Jesus clarifies this matter in verses 60-65 next week. Right now I want us to think soberly about Isaiah 53:4-9. This is the heart of what it is Jesus is saying to these people. This is what [Isaiah] said. I suspect everyone in this room has heard these [words] at least once, maybe twice, or who know how many times.

“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.”

Jesus offers Himself as the fulfillment of that passage. It is only the person who accepts what Jesus has done as if He had done it for them personally, who will every receive the gift of eternal life. If you haven’t, you must. Pray with me.

Our Father, grant that we might hear clearly what Jesus has to say; grant that we might see clearly what Jesus has done; and grant that we, all by Your grace, might have hearts that are tender to receive the gift of faith in Jesus. In His name, amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Have you ever asked God the Father to enable you to have, or to have more, faith in Jesus?
2. Has anyone ever used something from your past, whether accurately or not, against you? Have you done the same to others?
3. The Bible both assumes and teaches that all men know there is a God. Does your experience confirm this? Do you think this means all people actually worship the same God? Why or why not? (The answer to this was not part of the message.)
4. How often do you go back and read the larger context of an Old Testament verses or passage cited in the New?
5. Jesus cites Isaiah 54:13 to help clarify the Father’s role in our salvation. What do you understand the Father’s role to be in our salvation?
6. Who died in the wilderness during the Exodus and why did they do so? (See Numbers 14:20-25 and Psalm 95:7-11 and Hebrews 3:7-11)
7. How many of God’s attributes can you bring to mind? Which of these is most often emphasized today and which are neglected? What is the result of such neglect?
8. Are you familiar with Isaiah 53:4-9? How do these verses help us to understand Jesus’ words in John 6?
9. Why is it hard for us to really believe that our sins are worthy of death? What do you understand to be the Bible’s explanation of this?