

This morning as we continue in our series on prayer we come to some really practical stuff in that we are looking at how we build a prayer life. As ever because I'm up here doesn't mean I have sorted this out completely. I, like all of us, am still learning, growing and needing help and encouragement in my prayer life.

How do we build a prayer life, that is how do we bring prayer into our lives as opposed to just saying the odd prayer? It won't surprise you if I suggest that a good way to learn is to look at the Bible and see how people there involved prayer in their lives and learn from that. So we look at people like Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Nehemiah and Daniel from the Old Testament and then of course Jesus and also Paul in the New.

However rather than go through each and learn little bits what I will try and do is give us some principles and use some of these people of prayer from Scripture as our examples.

Let me suggest three things to help us build a prayer life. As we listen let's open ourselves to God and listen to what he says to each of us that he may move us a step forward in our life of prayer. And because we are all at different points in our Christian life God will be saying different things to us.

## 1. Be regular

Sounds a little like an advert for All Bran or something like that. What I see in the Bible is that many of the people who we associate with prayer seem to have had a regular time to pray.

We see the same in the life of Daniel. In Daniel six we read how King Darius was encouraged to issue a decree that no one should pray to anyone other than him. Daniel couldn't do that and Daniel 6:10, "Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before."

However Jesus of course is our prime example. We may be aware from places like Mark 1:35 how, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." Luke in 5:16 shows that this was his regular pattern, "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." It was a regular thing.

For Daniel and for Jesus and many followers of Jesus be they in Scripture or in the life of the church a key to building a prayer life has been to have a regular time to pray. In this way prayer is part of life, of the way we live our day of our routine.

No one is suggesting this is easy. It does require some discipline and effort.

My pattern has always been to have my main time of prayer in the morning. It is part of the routine of my life and has been over many years. When the children came along they, as is the wont of children, often woke up early. For a while that threatened my prayer time and I struggled. I tried other times but it didn't suit me. So I determined simply to get up earlier than the children and the time got earlier and earlier. That carried on for a while until the children, whenever they got up, were able to occupy themselves and I could return to a more sensible time to pray.

But that regular time is vital. Because my main time of prayer is first thing in the morning then I know if I have got to breakfast whether I have had it or not, which is a bit of an indictment really because I never miss breakfast. I regularly eat breakfast, sorry let me rephrase that I regularly eat!! But isn't that the case for many of us our eating is regular, just as our breathing is regular and in the same way prayer should be a regular part of our lives.

So how is it with you? Are you having a time or regular prayer or is prayer a bit haphazard a bit hit and miss? If it is the latter what are you going to do about it? Prayer is a vital part of our relationship with God and if we rarely or never use it then that relationship cannot develop. It is obvious because we know it is true in every relationship.

How many parents complain that their teenage children only grunt at them and that it is difficult to build the relationship? I have a feeling that at times we are like teenagers who, if we speak to God at all do so as if with grunts rather than in terms of building a relationship.

Let's take a step forward in prayer and, if we are not doing it, let's aim to be regular in our prayer.

## 2. be watchful

By that I mean be alive and alert to what is going on around you so that you turn the events and needs of the day into prayer.

Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane asked Peter James and John to "watch and pray". Paul in Col 4:2 encouraged the Christians at Colossae to "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful." Being watchful has the sense of being alert to danger but also to the need and opportunities to pray. It is here that we learn from Nehemiah. There in chap 1 he heard the news of the problems in Jerusalem and his immediate response was to pray. The news affected him if we look at v4, "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven" He wept at the news but then he also prayed. This is prayer in life rather than just a quiet time. In that what was happening affected him and he immediately turned it into prayer. The other day I had an email saying someone I knew a bit younger than me had died. It saddened me but I have to admit it didn't cause me to pray. I feel sad about that because it means I wasn't being watchful.

Later on in Nehemiah again we see him turning naturally God in the face of difficult circumstances. In chap 4 as they were rebuilding the walls there was opposition and 4:9, "we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat."

And it wasn't as if he always set aside hours to pray, for in 2:4 when the King asked him what he wanted the prayer was much shorter, just a quick "help me get this right God" as he drew breath to answer the King's question. But the point in both instances is that he was sensitive. He was watchful, aware of the situation and of the need to pray because he was aware of his dependency upon God. Nehemiah was looking at what was going on around him and events and people stimulated him to pray.

As we see the news if we are watchful it will stimulate us to prayer as the news from Jerusalem stimulated Nehemiah. As we chat with the boss or colleagues at work a remark may give us an opening to share something of our faith and then the need for a quick word of prayer like Nehemiah.

It is as we are looking that we note things to pray about and so like Nehemiah will if we are watchful and aware send up a quick prayer.

When an email comes through as it sometimes does from the church office or from other friends about someone in need let it be the stimulus to pray and do it there and then as well as later.

There are many, many ways in which we can respond to our world in prayer and so our prayer life moves out of the prayer room into the daily events of life but also prayer is moved out of that quiet place and set in the nitty gritty of life.

Mind you, do get the timing of your praying outside the room right. I heard once of a game of football in Brazil between Corinthians and Rio Preto when Roberto Rivelino scored for Corinthians in 3 seconds. The Rio Preto goalkeeper Isadore Irandir was on his knees finishing his pre-match prayer.

As I think about weaving prayer into every part of life the word little comes to me and it comes in two ways.

It makes me think of little and often. In the way that in 2:4 Nehemiah's prayer was hardly a prayer at all, just a quick cry for help. That clearly was part of Nehemiah's life and so later again where there was renewed opposition we see another quick prayer, "Now strengthen my hands." Little and often.

I wonder what your habits are, what are your little idiosyncrasies? We all have them some may be cute, others annoying and others just plain horrible. Habits just grow with and in us. For Nehemiah prayer was a habit and it is that habit of prayer, little and often, as people or events stir us that is part of growing a prayer life as opposed to having a prayer time. It is part of being in a relationship with our heavenly Father so that we turn to him in prayer naturally at many points in the day.

The other way the word little comes to my mind in this context is in praying for little things. Nehemiah here was praying for something pretty big, the restoration of the people of God but prayer doesn't always have to be about these huge things. In fact for the most part life is full of little things and praying about those little things as they come up is part of building a prayer life. The little thing may be asking God to give you patience and not speak bitter words when someone cuts you up in the car. Or asking God to give you grace when a friend lets you down again or the children are playing up. Little things and in asking God about them we build prayer into life.

CS Lewis in his book Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer, wrote, "And perhaps as those who do not turn to God in petty trials will have no habit or such resort to help them when the great trials come, so those who have not learned to ask him for childish things will have less readiness to ask him for great ones."

Building a prayer life means starting with the little things, the small concerns you, your children your friends may have.

If prayer is to be part of our life we need to be watchful that is sensitive to the people and events around us, sensitive to God and his concern for our world and to be used by God to link the two together.

The third and final thing I will say this morning is

### **3. be with others**

Now I know we have spoken of Jesus going off to a lonely place to pray and in the first of this series I took us to that passage in Matt 6 where Jesus encouraged his followers to go into their room and pray in private. I certainly believe that solitary prayer is an essential part of growing a prayer life but it is not the only part.

Going back to Nehemiah in 4:8&9, "They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God." Do you see that? They plotted but **WE** prayed. It was a united and common activity. It does seem as if praying together was a common practice in the early church prayer was often corporate, "they raised their voices together in prayer to God" (Acts 4:24)

Jesus spoke of the same on Matt 18:19-20, "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." It seems clear that Jesus was encouraging his disciples to pray together in his name with the assurance that God would answer. Now, as we saw last week the answer may not be what we want because God is God and his will is sovereign. However the point is that Jesus encouraged corporate prayer, two or three or more. He was not saying that prayer is effective because of the numbers but that uniting together in prayer is good.

Many of us who have been used to prayer groups, prayer meetings, prayer triplets, prayer partnerships will testify to the benefit that they have been in our prayer life. Some times I have turned out on a dark night in the middle of the week to go to some prayer meeting feeling tired and perhaps a bit down only to be encouraged and inspired by the passion in the prayers of others by the breadth of what we pray for and the depth of the insights given to people by God as they pray. And yes I have learned much by being with others as they pray.

Gordon and Maurice have just shown us an example of a prayer partnership and I would encourage you to talk with them later about

how they got started what they do and so on and then let's see these partnerships replicated across church. To pray with others is a privilege and an encouragement. It positively builds our prayer life.

How do we build a prayer life? There is much we might have thought about but this morning just three things: be regular, be watchful and be with others in prayer.

Next week we finish our series with the equally practical question of what should I pray.