

Series: Pray20

Sermon 1: Does Prayer Change Things?

Text: Exodus 32

Intro

What a powerful, warm call to prayer. Will you join me in thanking Melvin for sharing his heart for God? Wow!

We are beginning a new sermon series this week called PRAY20. And the heart behind this series is to invite you in to a stronger relationship with God that maybe you've wanted but never had or maybe you didn't even know was possible. I want us to encounter the power and presence of God, And the access point to that relationship is prayer.

Now, maybe you grew up like me where the bulk of your prayers were at dinner before you ate your Velveeta shells & cheese. Or maybe it was the bedtime nursery rhyme prayers – now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep. Maybe you've prayed sincerely and nothing has happened. Many of us were never really shown or taught about prayer as anything more.

Prayer for most of us today isn't about stepping into the power and presence of God, it's a kind of one way informing & requesting of God and hoping he hears. And yet I look at scripture and scripture is FILLED with people talking with God. and God responding.

- I see Joshua just tell the sun to stand still and I see God answer him.
- I see Elisha pray for rain and God sends rain!

- I see Gideon struggle to know whether he's supposed to go to battle so he asks God for an answer and God says here Gideon I'll verify my plans for you
- I see Jesus spend hours alone with God the father
- I see James tell me the prayers of a righteous person bring about good things. That God hears and responds to people when they pray
- I see the early church pray and the walls shake, & chains break, & demons flee

And I want to see God move like that! And I think you do to. We want to see God intervene in our world in power because he heard the prayers of his people! And more than I want his power at work in me, I want to be that close to GOD!

I don't want to settle for just dinner and bedtime prayers because I don't want to settle for just a dinner and bedtime God. I don't just want the God of my emergencies. I want all of God. I want him to breathe life into my marriage, into my neighborhood, into my kids. I want God's power at work in all of it!

That's what this series is about. PRAY20 is our way of inviting you into a deeper understanding of prayer and into a movement of prayer that is beginning to stir here at Mercy. Inviting you to experience a season of refreshing in your soul that is found in the presence of the Lord.

So I believe I am really on assignment right now for us Mercy Church. And I don't say that often and I don't say it lightly. I and our elders are under conviction from God that he is calling

us to a renewed season of prayer. 2 simple goals. One collective and one personal to you.

- Collective: I want 2020 to be the year the people of Mercy get desperate for God. Hungry for God. And that will express itself in a rich and powerful culture of prayer unlike anything you've ever been a part of. I want us to be a church that meets with God. That the power of God resides in and anyone in our community christian or not knows they can come here and find the power of God to rescue them, to save them, to heal them. That marriages have hope here. That addicts have hope here. That prodigals have hope here because this church meets with God. And the power of God is unleashed through their prayers.
- Personal: Pray20 is a challenge to you. I want to show you what prayer really is. And then challenge you to pray for 20 minutes every day. That might seem crazy right now. BUT, hang with us and see. The point isn't the 20 minutes. It's the relationship with God that will flourish when given some real time.

Here's where we are going in the series: Today we are going to talk about if and how prayer changes things. Like why even bother to pray. Next week we'll talk about prayer as a way to draw close to God the father. Look at the Lord's prayer. Then we'll talk about persistence in prayer. And before we are done we are going to have a whole sermon on what to do when God doesn't seem to be answering our prayers.

If you are new to Mercy listen to me right now: I want to encourage you to stick this out for the next 5 weeks. It takes

more than a week to get to know a church. So, take the series. Lord willing you'll take something from it that will really help you. Not only that, you'll have the chance to go to something we call starting point. Which is a first step for anyone here to learn about Mercy, meet our leadership, and hear about how we build people up in their faith here.

OK. Series intro done, time to move into today's passage. Starting with a question that a lot of people are afraid to ask out loud but I think dictates a lot of prayer lives.

Does Prayer Really Change Things?

Exodus 32.7-11

What role do our prayers have in changing God's plans? Do our prayers convince God to do something he wasn't already planning to do? Cause sometimes I pray and nothing happens. Sometimes I pray and stuff does happen but was that already going to happen? Sometimes I forget to pray and it still happens. So, does prayer really change things?

Now this one is going to be a brain flex kind of message ok. Because I'm going to show you in a minute clear and compelling scripture that God's purposes and plans are eternal and he knows the beginning and the end and nothing surprises him. And so what is the purpose of prayer? Can it affect the future?

Exodus 32 is an awesome story. The more you try to understand it all the more it will be very difficult to

understand. But let's dig into it and see what the Lord has for us.

7 The Lord spoke to Moses: "Go down at once! For your people you brought up from the land of Egypt have acted corruptly. 8 They have quickly turned from the way I commanded them; they have made for themselves an image of a calf. They have bowed down to it, sacrificed to it, and said, 'Israel, these are your gods, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.' "

Ok let me set the scene. Moses is the leader of God's people. Under God's orders, Moses emancipated all 2 million of them from control of Egypt and was leading them through the wilderness to the promised land.

Moses has left this group alone at the bottom of a mountain so he can go up on the mountain to get the 10 commandments. And he's gone a little longer than he had expected. Cause you know, GOD IS UP THERE and he's talking with God. He's not going check his phone whilst talking with God.

Well, Israel LOSES it. Starts freaking out because HEY, WHERE IS MOSES? He said he'd be back by now. WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO? He's not answering texts!

Now the absurdity of this panic should not be lost on us. Remember after all that God did *just* bring them out of enslavement to the most powerful nation in the known world.

- He did it through 10 very incredible **plagues** that made it clear GOD was the one doing the work.
- And on their way out God gave them a parting gift. All the **gold and silver** these upper class Egyptians had, he made them give that gold and silver to these newly freed Israelites.
- So fresh bling in hand, they go out into the wilderness and God provides a **pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire** by night to guide them.
- When Pharaoh tries to attack, he **splits the red sea** so they can walk on dry ground and then brings it back together destroying pharaoh's army in it.
- He PROVIDES **food from heaven** for them in the desert.
- AND, he keeps their **sandals** from looking or feeling worn at ALL even after all this journey.

And YET, they think God has abandoned them. Before we roll our eyes, this is us isn't it? So prone to forget what God has done and absolutely focused on the present micro moment we are in. Well, ungrateful and forgetful Israel decides ok here's what we'll do. We'll melt all that silver and gold GOD GAVE US and use it to create and new god to worship. So they do, and they throw a party that leads to a drunken cultic like orgy around this thing.

And this complete rebellion is probably why God said what he said in verse 7 "Go down at once! For **your people you brought up from the land of Egypt have acted corruptly**"

HA! Whose people? Sounds like when my kids misbehave and I call Courtney to tell her that HER kids misbehaved. Aren't these God's people? God is pawning them off on Moses right now. Then verse 9

9 The Lord also said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and they are indeed a stiff-necked people. 10 Now leave me alone, so that my anger can burn against them and I can destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

DESTROY them. You see that right? Moses I need you to step away because I'm about to end this whole thing right now. They are about to catch me outside. But watch what happens next. One of the boldest prayers ever.

11 But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God: "Lord, why does your anger burn against **your** people **you** brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a strong hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, 'He brought them out with an evil intent to kill them in the mountains and eliminate them from the face of the earth'? **Turn** from your fierce anger and **relent** concerning this disaster **planned** for your people. (other translations say repent. Basically, God I'm asking you to change your mind) 13 Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel — you swore to them by yourself and declared, 'I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky and will give your offspring all this land that I have promised, and they will inherit it forever.' "

Moses reminds God of his promise he made to Israel. As a way to call God to remain true to his character by keeping his promise. And then the most amazing verse...

14 So the Lord **relented** concerning the disaster he had said he would bring on his people. -- Exodus 32:7-14 (CSB)

WHAT!?! Did Moses' prayer CHANGE GOD'S MIND? That's what it looks like. Moses reminds God of something God said earlier and in doing so seems to cause God to change his mind and NOT do what he was about to do.

What is happening here? Did God not get a good night sleep? Have a bad day at work so he's snapping at the kids? And...this makes it even crazier to me...The guy writing Exodus...is MOSES. Moses is also the guy who wrote Numbers. Numbers 23.19 says

God is not a man, that he might lie, or a son of man, that he might change his mind. -- Numbers 23:19

SO, the same author MOSES...convinces God through prayer to change his mind and then makes it clear to us that God doesn't change his mind. What is happening? How are we to make sense of this?

Well, is happening here is something very powerful and mysterious that is incredibly important to be aware of when it comes to the notion of prayer. But what I'm about to tell you is not the secret formula for how the mind of God works. I've got multiple accountants in my family and if you think like they do where everything has to add up to zero...this might frustrate you. Because what we see here are truths on display that are in tension and need to remain in tension with one

another in order to really understand the purpose and power of our prayers.

1. The Purposes & Promises of God are unchanging¹

No, the short answer is that the bible is filled with consistent descriptions of God as eternal, all knowing, and unchanging. In fact one of the things that brings comfort to all the writers in the bible is that he doesn't change! He's faithful...and he will always be faithful. Comfort comes from believing he knows the plans he has for us.

10 I declare the end from the beginning, and from long ago what is not yet done, saying: my plan will take place, and I will do all my will. -- Isaiah 46:10

Comfort comes from knowing that his promises to be with us, to rescue us from sin and death, to give us life eternal. This God is alpha and omega and created the world by his word and upholds the world moment to moment. NOTHING surprises our God.

Here's why this matters for our prayers. If God was changing like that, **WOULD** be like trying to stroke God's ego. It would be trying to do enough good to satisfy him so he does good back for you or maybe trying to say the magic set of words. And maybe that's how you've viewed prayer. But if the purposes and promises of God are unchanging, the pressure is

taken off of us...which is freeing. But that still leaves us with the question of how our praying DOES fit in to all of this.

2. The Plans of God are still unfolding

I'm not saying his plan is changing. I'm saying his plan is unfolding in the world. Think about this. In verse 7 God tells Moses to go down and see what is going on. Moses didn't know. God informs Moses of what's going on. Tells him to go down there.

THEN, Moses turns around and uses the very promises of God as the logic behind his request.

What you see happening here is that God put Moses in a situation where he would see the problem, remember God's promise, and then turn around and intercede on behalf of Israel.

If God were going to crush his people he wouldn't have sent Moses down there. No, God was setting up a mediator between he and his people. Which leads right to our third truth.

3. The Prayers of God's people are working

I can't help but look at the clear reading, the clear meaning of this text:

14 So the Lord **relented** concerning the disaster he had said he would bring on his people.

¹ The wording of the first two truths are borrowed from a 2019 article by David Platt titled "Does God Change his Mind?" which surveys Exodus 32.

Without this prayer, God would have destroyed Israel. This prayer was instrumental in getting God to change his course of action.²

So what is happening here? Well, God is both holy and merciful. He's just and he's loving. How is he remaining true to his unchanging purposes and promises? Well, what if we saw Moses pray like this. **Moses' prayer isn't changing God's plan, Moses prayer is fulfilling God's plan.**

Now many of you are like me and instantly filter that statement through your skepticism filter.

So, you ask...What if Moses didn't pray? Then would God have destroyed Israel? AND THEN it wouldn't have been God's will to spare Israel after all? Or...would God have just gotten somebody else if Moses didn't do it?

And you translate that to your life and think...So when I pray it was God's will for me to pray? Or if I forget to, God will get somebody else to? Or maybe my not praying was instrumental in something NOT happening?

And then your brain says STOP IT MAN. THAT HURTS!

And the reason that frustrates us is because we are asking the wrong question about God and his plans. Maybe this will help.

² Thanks to my old pastor J.D. Greear for the "instrumental" wording right here. I think this word is a sufficient label for the way prayer works. It leaves room for mystery while affirming still affirming our place in the unfolding plan of God.

My old pastor shared this with me years ago and it helped me a lot. It's an illustration from a 19th century Princeton theologian named A.A. Hodge.

"Does God know the day you'll die? Yes. Has he appointed that day? Yes. Can you do anything to change that day? No. Then why do you eat? To live. What happens if you don't eat? You die. Then if you don't eat, and die, then would that be the day that God had appointed for you to die?"

(New slide) ...Quit asking stupid questions and just eat. Eating is the pre-ordained way God has appointed for living."³ Quit asking stupid questions and just PRAY.

Here's the point: **Moses is focused on God's unchanging promise and how it applies to his present situation.**

This is a form of prayer I really want us to lean into here at Mercy Church. It's not the only type of prayer there is ok. Next week, all about communion with the father. And there are other forms we'll hit on but this one is big.

See Moses is a mediator between God and his people. God puts him there to pray into effect God's relenting from disaster. And that's what he does with you and I too.

³ Borrowed from J.D. Greear. He Adapted from Charles Ryrie, who stole it from A. A. Hodge, *Evangelical Theology* (1890), 92–93. *Nothing new under the sun*

He sovereignly puts you and I into a point and time so that we can claim the promises of God and bring their power to bear on the people and situations around us. Church this is why God calls us a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Because we are sent down here to BELIEVE GOD on behalf of a people, a community, a workplace, who so desperately need him.

Some of you ask “Why did God put me in this family?” THIS IS WHY! Intercessory prayer does 3 things:
See the problem, Believe the promise, and release his power.

Problem: Listen there are many of you that are the only Christian in your workplace AND THIS IS WHY YOU ARE THERE! You need to get there early this week. And you need to pray over that workspace and announce the KINGDOM OF GOD IS HERE WITH ME. God everyone here is TRYING. Trying to put on a good face. But they are hurting. They need YOUR LOVE.

Believe the promise: Say GOD...You do not desire that any should perish but that all should come to everlasting life.

Release his power: And its through my prayers that God has ordained a CHANGE in someone’s eternal destiny. FOR YOUR GLORY. Because ITS CONSISTENT WITH YOUR CHARACTER TO SAVE HERE. You need to wake up and pray over your kids. Over your spouse. Over your siblings. Your roommate. Your professor. To and I’ve got these people I love who need you so God...save them!

God I see a marriage in crisis over here. God marriage is your gift. I believe you give it and you designed it to be a blessing to us and an anthem to the world about the love of Christ. God I ask you to restore this marriage for your glory.

This is how God has set up the system. He’s put you in a place to believe on him for the things he wants to do. And in doing so, you release his power in the world. He did it with Moses, he did it with ALL the prophets. I think of Jonah going into Nineveh. Why? God sent him there to preach to them so they would repent and he wouldn’t destroy them.

Sometimes we think “Well, whats the point if God is going to do it anyway?” As if God’s sovereignty would KEEP us from praying. But scripture is saying exactly the opposite. Realizing God has put you in a place to be an instrument of his power is motivation TO PRAY.

Spring 2019 I’m sitting in Noda coffee shop. Reading Isaiah 56. Bible sitting there. 23 yr old Guy sits down next to me. NOT on his phone. Which is so refreshing. He actually has a desire for human interaction. We get to talking. Which is something humans can still do. He’s applying for a job at the shop. He says “I’m trying to figure out what my purpose in life is.” “Is it here?” “I don’t know. I grew up in church world and just had some bad experiences.” “Now I don’t know what to think.” “Yeah, that happened to me too.” NOW I AM PRAYING FOR THIS DUDE. Angels...ASSEMBLE! “I don’t know what my purpose is.” “Weve gotten pretty deep. What’s your name man?” “Isaiah.” I said “Shut up.” I said Isaiah since you sat down you probably noticed I have this bible open on the table. Today I was reading Isaiah 56. And I didn’t know why I was reading it and now I know why. God put me right here to believe FOR you. And to tell you he still loves you and is

standing with arms open wide ready to receive you just as you are if you will come to him. HE loves you.

And then not 10 seconds later the lady comes up and says “Ummm...Isaiah? Time for your interview.” I WAS LIKE WHAT!?!? I thought the whole coffee house was gonna bust out in REVIVAL. Isaiah didn’t come to faith right there. But, for the first time in a long time he heard the gospel in love. You say “Yeah that never happens dude.” YES IT DOES! We just don’t perceive the problem, or believe his promise, so of course we don’t pray for his power to intervene.

Believer, what if the main reason God has you here is to

pray? To pray for people. To pray for his kingdom come and his will be done.

You are chosen by God for this time and this moment and it should DRIVE us to pray.

There are like hundreds of promises from God in scripture for us. That’s not an exaggeration. But if we are going to be these people who believe YES prayer changes things because God ordains us to get in here and believe so that the present path people are on will be changed into alignment with the fulfilling of his plan. BUT TO DO THAT...we gotta be filled with his spirit and with his word. Listening to God, perceiving where he is working, and then applying his promises to our day.

I told you I want you to pray for 20 minutes every day. I hope by now you see how it’s the most important 20 minutes you’ll spend in your day. But you gotta work up to that. It’s such a jump at first. So start with one minute. Seriously. As a way of modeling for you and training you how to pray we are going to take the next 5 minutes and pray together. We are going use a

simple outline to help you figure out what to pray. Gonna be on the screen. It’s not an easy acronym. I planned on having one for you but chose clarity.

- **Listen to God** – hardest minute. We shun silence so hard. We want distraction. But it may be the most powerful minute. But when we just go to God with our shopping list, we leave no room for him to tell us what is happening at the foot of the mountain. Before Moses Prayed, Moses Listened. GOD showed Moses what to pray about. Listen! Jesus says that the people who belong to God are like sheep who know the shepherd’s voice. Listen. For God to bring something or someone to mind that he wants to work in. Maybe...and listen this is true more than we like it...maybe the problem he’s going to bring to mind is YOU. Again we are SO not used to this so just go with it for a minute and then it will be done. Ever heard someone say “God brought you to mind?” This is how. We listen. “God, I’m listening.”
- **Remember God: Who he is and what he has done.** “LORD” Moses says. That’s the first thing he says “LORD!” That’s who he is. And for what he has done. Moses says you brought them up out of the land. God you are a saving God! The Psalmists spend SO MUCH time praising God and always the requests they make are tied to his character. God do this because THIS IS CONSISTENT WITH YOUR CHARACTER. Praise him for saving you. James says all good things in our life are a gift from our heavenly father. Praise him. If you need help right here, go to Psalm 145 and just read it aloud.

It's a prayer of praise & remembrance.

- **Ask God** – Finish by going to God like a child goes to her daddy and asks. He loves for us to come to him like children. So go to him. Don't worry about eloquence. In fact eloquence is dangerous in prayer. Just tell him!

GROUP UP. Take 5 minutes. Most you've prayed in years. That's OK. Isaiah 56.7 – God says my house will be a house of prayer. So, this is the Lord's house. We are the Lord's house. We are going to grow into being a people of prayer.