

Grace, mercy and peace to you from our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit! Amen.

SERMON THEME: "Prayer: Heartbeat of the Soul!"

SERMON TEXT: Psalm 5:1-3 (Read first)

Dearly Beloved,

A dignified older pastor owned a male parrot which he was very proud of, but the bird had a serious fault. It had been previously owned by a filthy-mouthed person, and had picked up an appalling vocabulary of cuss words. After several embarrassing episodes, the clergyman decided he would have to destroy the parrot; there seemed no hope for reform. But a woman in the parish heard about the dilemma and suggested a last-resort remedy. "I have a female parrot," she said, "that is an absolute saint. She sits quietly on her perch and says nothing but, 'Let's pray... Let's pray!' Pastor, why don't you bring your parrot over and see if my bird's good influence might rub off on him, and maybe clean up his speech?" Well," thought the pastor, "it was certainly worth a try." So the next day he arrived with his pet tucked under his arm. The foul-mouthed bird took one look at the lady parrot, and true to character blurted out, "Hi sweetie; how about a little kiss?" Just as quickly, the lady bird squealed, "Thank God? My prayers have been answered!"

Truly, if there's any pure joy this side of heaven, it is answered prayer! Our Lord Jesus shows His love for us in many ways, foremost of course by coming into this world to save our souls from sin! But day-to-day His mercies come to us without fail! Jeremiah said it well, "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness!" (Lamentations 3:22, 23). This is no more wonderfully shown to us than through answers to prayer!

So much is prayer a part of the life of the people of God that it is mentioned at least 350 times in 46 of the writings of Holy Scripture! Time and again the patriarchs of old depended on the outcome of prayer. Jesus Himself frequently petitioned the heavenly Father, setting an example for all of us who have been "born again of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5).

If there is any one mark of commitment to Jesus in response to His saving grace, it is our daily walking with Him. A big part of that is prayer; when we rise, through the ups and downs of the day, and when we go to bed—prayer is at the center of the Christian life! Prayer is talking, communicating with our Lord. It is, or should be, an ongoing dialogue with our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier! Talking with God, sharing our deepest feelings, asking for things we need, thanking Him for providing our needs and answering our prayers, praising and glorifying Him for saving our souls, seeking help and healing for others, and more—all of these make up our conversations with our heavenly Father and our Friend and Savior, Christ Jesus! To pray, in the Greek—*proseuchomai*, is to go to; to approach almighty God with a petition, a request or expression of adoration. It is an act of faith, a personal encounter, with the belief God both hears and answers! Prayer is characteristic of a close, personal relationship with a holy God; it is an expression of dependency on Him, and readily fills the heart with hope and expectation, knowing that He will answer in a way that is best for us!

We see all of this in Psalm 5:1-3, a prayer of King David; most certainly a prayer from the heart! He is humbly pleading. His words leave no doubt he is hurting. He is surrounded by wickedness, feels threatened by evildoers. But in the LORD he finds refuge, One he can trust, a God who has the power to deliver him, restore his sense of security, and bring joy to his heart! "Give ear to my words, O LORD" he pleads. "Hear my groaning...my cry!" Realizing he is unworthy to approach the throne of grace, he pleads to his King and God, possibly on his knees or even lying on his face, with hands raised toward heaven! Here we see the greatest ruler on earth—a man with wealth and power and popularity—humbled before the God of glory, pouring out his heart! He appeals to the mercy of God; he begs God to act on the unrest and hurt and fear in the deepest places of his heart!

Even as he prays he knows his voice is heard—"...in the morning I (will) prepare a sacrifice for You, and watch" (v. 3). He knows the answer is on the way! David knew then already, as we have seen affirmed in Matthew and Luke, that with God nothing is impossible; all things are possible with the God who merely spoke and created everything out of nothingness! So it is that John later writes, "This is the confidence we have in Him,

that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of Him" (1 John 5:14, 15).

Jesus Himself, speaking to anyone who believes in Him, made this promise, "Whatever you ask in My name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:13). This is the kind of promise that moves any of us with a living faith first to confess our sins, believing we are then forgiven! And when our hearts are purged of sin, when we have the righteousness of Christ, we can be sure that whatever else we ask in accord with the will of God, it will be given us! David elsewhere adds this assurance, "The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous, and His ears toward their cry" (Psalm 34:15). This stands in stark contrast to what Scripture says several times about the prayers of impenitent sinners, summed up in these words of Isaiah: "When you spread forth your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen" (1:15; Psalm 66:18; John 9:31). Only the prayers of people right with God, forgiven sinners, will be heard and answered!

Let's bring all of this home. If there is any one notable measure of our spiritual health, it is the way we pray. If there is little or no prayer at all, we might ask, "Is there any life in Christ?" Is there any love for God, any dependency on Him, any thanksgiving for His mercies, any asking for forgiveness and guidance and help? It should be quite clear, considering the prominence of prayer in the Word of God, that our prayer habits point to the very heart of our spiritual well-being! And we're not talking about just speaking prayer words, but making utterances that come from the deepest places within! "My groaning...the sound of my cry..." David said. Just rattling off right-sounding words isn't necessarily prayer. Repeating the Lord's Prayer by memory or by rote, in a joyless, unthinking, detached way, is not praying. To the contrary, this is what the LORD condemned when He said, "This people draw near with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, while their hearts are far from Me" (Isaiah 29:13).

Our gracious and loving Lord is listening for prayer that is "The Heartbeat of the Soul!" He wants our communication with Him to come with feeling, to be not only sincere, but to be an expres-

sion of love and trust and hope, the seeds of which were first planted in Holy Baptism! Keep in mind that God can see into the secret places of our hearts. He knows when we are hurting, or ashamed, or afraid. He sees when we're attacked by someone, when we fail in an endeavor, when the devil tries to tempt us or get us to doubt what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ means to us! He is fully aware of the hurt of losing a loved one, and the awfulness of loneliness! Because He loves us, because His precious Son gave His life that we might live, our heavenly Father **WANTS** to answer our every prayer!

Scripture says, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:8). He has an answer for everything that you need or if He wills, everything you want! To fail to ask for something because you think God won't give it to you anyway is wrong; He wants you to take the leap of faith! Believe that you will receive it; "ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full," Jesus promised (John 16:24)! This is the key: Asking. Praying in faith! A small child says to his parent, "I'm hungry—can I have something to eat?" What loving parent would not feed the child? You and I are children of the heavenly Father. How much more does He love us than we can love our own children? By now I hope you've come to realize the truth of what James writes: "You have not because you ask not..." (4:2). If there's an unmet need in your life, if you are struggling with something beyond your ability to resolve, have you in earnest, in from-the-depths-of-the-heart prayer, **ASKED** the Lord God to take care of it for you? Can the Lord hear the groaning, the cry of your heart; are you pleading for mercy, willing to yield to whatever answer the Lord gives? Are you *expecting* an answer?

James adds a couple more things: "...ask in faith, with no doubting" (1:6), and this, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (4:3). David did not doubt. He was not asking for anything wrong. His short, but heartfelt prayer simply placed his own well-being in the loving care of his Father in heaven! In retrospect, all of David's prayers were answered, and purely by the grace of God he found favor with both the **LORD** and the nation of Israel! So much so that he was counted worthy to be in the lineage of the promised Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ! A sinner, yes, but a forgiven sinner, just as we who are penitent have been declared innocent of sin—justified

by grace—through a living faith in Jesus Christ!

And as God's own, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, we can be sure that the God of heaven—who never changes—is just as willing and able to answer our prayers as He did David's plea for mercy! The need for prayer in our midst here at Grace is critical! A new chapter in the history of this congregation is about to be written. With a new pastor you will have a host of opportunities and challenges to take to the Lord in prayer. It is not an exaggeration to say that the ongoing and I hope expanding mission of this congregation, centered in Christ, is fully dependent on prayer! We need to address the spiritual needs of all ages, from young to old, in this community. A secular society is making ministry more difficult in several ways, and prayer can provide the means for both defense and offense. We have individual circumstances, including aging, health issues, loneliness, family concerns, and more, that invite the prayers and personal care of all. We're all affected by the actions of our Federal and State governments, and only by prayer do we have any hope of bringing about any meaningful and God-pleasing change. You can add to the list, but the point is made, personal and corporate prayer—prayers from the heart—are a necessary part of our individual lives as Christians from this time forward to the day the trumpet is heard and "the Son of man (is seen) coming on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory" (Matthew 24:30)!

"Prayer: Heartbeat of the soul!" A soul alive in Christ will seize every opportunity to pray! "Pray constantly," Paul wrote. Prayer is really a way of life for the child of God, as important as breathing, as necessary as sunlight and water to the earth. It is the only means of repentance, the only way to make requests of God, and a very personal way to tell Jesus we love Him! There is no spiritual life without prayer, so let's really live; let's pray, all the day every day, and expect our dear Lord to hear and answer!

Jesus, the one Mediator between God and man, wants to hear what you have on your heart, your problems and your joys. Like David, start the day with Him, bare your feelings, be bold to ask; just love Him and believe the answer's on the way. Watch for it! You will never be disappointed!

The Lord's Supper awaits us, which signals time to close. Like

the pastor who was invited over for dinner and was asked to say the meal prayer. His prayer was very short, prompting Junior to provide a quick insight: "You don't pray so long when you're hungry, do you?"

God bless your every prayer from the heart, to His own eternal glory! In Jesus' name, Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding will keep your hearts and minds through a living faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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