

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Visiting from: National Community Church – Washington D.C.
You & Me: Prayer
Acts10:1-25

Good morning! What a joy and privilege it is to be with you. I'm a pastor in Washington, D.C. so I don't get to travel on the weekend a whole lot. What a beautiful church building you have here. The times I've spent with you, Pastor John, tell me that all of you know how blessed you are. A couple of years ago, John and I sat down for the first time, and I felt like he was pastoring me. I was so encouraged by him. What a joy to be here with you.

Last week I was preaching in a very different place. I was in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Seven years ago my wife and our three kids flew there with me when we helped start a church there. In fact, I preached the first service. I will never forget it. I preached at a little theater they rented, and after I preached, we went to this piece of property and prayed that God would give them a building there, a place where they could office and have services and gather together. I remember we formed a circle and we prayed. That was seven years ago. Then four years ago, I went back and preached at the very same place where I had preached three years before. It was pretty awesome seeing an undeniable answer to prayer. After I preached that morning, we went over to another piece of property because churches in Ethiopia are growing. They were already more than 1,000 people. So we went over to another piece of property, formed a circle and prayed on the property, just an empty piece of land. Well, last weekend I was back there preaching to thousands and thousands of people in a building that now sits on the property where we prayed four years ago. It was one those moments where it just kind of builds your faith to believe, to see answers to prayer.

Here is what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about prayer genealogy and this idea that the blessings, the miracles, the breakthroughs, the things that God does, trace back to prayers that were prayed by us or for us. Here is the problem: if you are like me, you pray for something one time and then you forget. So by the time that God answers it, you can't even thank Him because you forgot you even asked for it. By the way, that is why my prayer journal next to my Bible is just so significant to me because in it I can keep track of the prayers that God has answered. I believe that one of the greatest moments in eternity is going to be that moment when God kind of peels back the curtain and says, "Look at this! I am going to connect all of the dots in your life, all of the miracles that happened, all of the amazing things. I am going to connect them back to the prayers that were prayed by you and for you." Oh, what a moment that is going to be as we thank God for the prayers He answered, and as we thank God for some of the prayers He didn't answer because we probably didn't pray for the right reason. This web of answered prayers will be revealed. It is going to be an amazing moment. You see, I believe that just as each of us have a genealogy, I believe that each of us have a prayer genealogy.

It is a joy for me to be here because I have family here this morning. I have family who live in the area. I was born in Minneapolis at the old Swedish Hospital. My grandfather was the first municipal judge in Fridley, Minnesota. Yesterday, I actually drove back by the old house where I have some of my earliest memories. I haven't been there in forever. A memory that came back to me was that of my grandfather. I remembered how my grandfather had this habit of kneeling next to his bed at night praying for his family. Well, he was hard of hearing, and he would take his hearing aid off at night so he couldn't hear himself pray. But everybody else in the house could hear him pray! It is a powerful thing when you hear someone interceding for you. Listen to me, there have been moments in my life when I have felt like the Holy Spirit in that still, small voice whispered to me and said, "Mark, the prayers that your grandfather prayed are being answered in your life now."

My grandfather died when I was six, but his prayers did not. Our prayers never die. I know that not everybody has that kind of prayer genealogy, but you could start one. Listen, I am here for a simple reason. I am just a guy who believes in the power of prayer. I think you are just one prayer away from a totally different life. That is what we are going to talk about this morning, Acts, chapter 10, starting at verse 1. We are going to drill down on this passage, but before we do, let me keep it simple. What we are going to talk about is really what happens when people pray, what happened when two people prayed, and by the time we are done, I hope to be able to trace your spiritual genealogy, maybe in a way that you have never noticed before.

¹ At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need....

And here is a little phrase that I want you to notice. I have this one underlined in my Bible. Here it is,

...and prayed to God regularly.

In other words, have this prayer habit. Pray regularly to God. One little observation right here. Here is what I've noticed. If you pray regularly to God, irregular things will happen regularly. Have you found that to be true, that when you pray you kind of never know how or when or where God is going to show up, and you live with this holy anticipation that God is ordering your footsteps? He has prepared good works in advance for us to do, and you never know what is going to happen. Look what happens here:

³ One day....

I kind of like these two words. One day.... Doesn't that kind of fill your heart with a little bit of hope this morning, with a little bit of excitement? Today could be that *one day*.

³ One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

Let's pause here for a minute. This week was an interesting week. On Wednesday I met with a member of the U.S. Congress who had contacted our office and said he wanted to get together and have a cup of coffee at Ebenezer's. That's our coffeehouse. Honestly, I wasn't sure what he

wanted to meet about. That doesn't happen every day, but we got together on a Wednesday, and he began to share his story with me. This is a guy who for many years directed the largest Christian camp in the country and one day, I don't know if it was like three o'clock in the afternoon, but he said one day he was praying, and it was like the Lord said, "Get ready!" He said, "I had no idea what that meant. Like for what?" For months there was kind of this sense that God was maybe preparing him for something, and so periodically it would just be like, "Get ready." One morning he is sitting down reading the newspaper and as he is turning the pages, he comes to a little story, a little paragraph that says that the congresswoman who represented his district was thinking about running for governor, which would vacate that office. Immediately it was like God said, "This is what I've been getting you ready for."

He said, "I don't have a political bone in my body. I didn't even know the boundaries of our district." He said, "I had to go online to look up the county statistics." And by the way, when he did, he said his wife walked in and asked, "What are you looking at?" "I'm looking at the county statistics." She said, "We are running for Congress, aren't we?" They had never had a conversation about it, never talked about it, but here is the thing. There is no way this guy is going to win. He doesn't have any connections. He doesn't even know how to run a campaign. He just felt like God had said, "Get ready!" and then one day something was conceived in his spirit, a dream, a vision, if you will.

Well, a couple of months before that election, the frontrunner dropped out. The next thing you know, a camp director is elected to the U.S. Congress, and he is now in his second term. He came over and we just had a wonderful talk. He said he wanted to thank me because during that time he had picked up a copy of *Wild Goose Chase*, a book I wrote a few years ago. He said, "It helped me know that I wasn't totally crazy and kind of affirmed that God was maybe moving that way." By the way, and this will bless you, he had just read *The Circle Maker*. He said, "Every morning, if you were to visit his congressional office building, on the fifth floor you would find a number of congresspeople circling the fifth floor of that office building praying for our country, praying for our staff, praying for the people that they work with. Is that not amazing? But it started with one of these moments -- just pray regularly, and then one day, you just never know, and if you are willing to take a little step of faith... I live with this sense that I never know what God is going to do, where He is going to take me, whom I am going to meet, but I know this -- if I meet regularly with God, then I am going to meet whom I need to meet. Are you tracking with me? Let me say it this way. Don't seek opportunities, seek God, and if you seek God, then opportunities will seek you. Let's keep going.

⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea." ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. ⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

Sometimes we read the Bible and we sort of assume what is going to happen, but it is just, *of course* this is going to happen. If this is myself, I am thinking, "You want me to go where, to meet whom, and stay with whom? This is crazy." But I've found that, usually, when God prompts me to move out in faith, He doesn't give all the details. Have you found that to be true? May I tell you why I think it's true? You see, we want God to give us manna for a month. We want God to

give us the 25-year plan. Why? So that we don't have to live by faith. But I think sometimes God gives us just enough to go on so that we continue live in complete dependence upon Him. We have to stay on our knees and stay in prayer, so that we get our marching orders from Him.

Here is what I love. Cornelius stepped out in faith. He sends his servants to go find Simon, who is called Peter. Now you can read this and say, "Okay, I get what you are saying, but is it really that big a deal?" Well, Joppa was 32 miles away from Caesarea. That doesn't seem that far to us, but you have to understand that in the first century, the average person never traveled outside a 30-mile radius of their birthplace. In other words, it was almost like God was asking Him to step into a totally different universe, to go to a place he had never been to meet someone he didn't know. It was a tremendous thing. I think these are the moments that kind of make us or break us. Here is my perspective on prayer. I think that sometimes for some of us, prayer is this one-way conversation. We just make sure that we get our laundry list lined up and we kind of give that to God as if our goal of prayer is to outline our agenda to God. Newsflash! The goal of prayer is for God to download His agenda for *us* so that we can hear what He is saying to *us*, so we can get our marching orders from God, and sometimes that might involve something that seems a little bit crazy. Now I love sharing stories, and I'll tell you why, because Revelation 12 says,

¹¹ They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony....

I think we need to share our testimonies because they build our faith. One of the joys of writing *The Circle Makers* was hearing stories of answered prayer, the faithfulness of God. Let me share one little story with you. Our church owns a coffeehouse on Capitol Hill called Ebenezer's. It is kind of a neat, little deal. We have about 600 customers a day. The idea was to build a place where the church and community could cross paths, but it's sort of a double win because every penny of profit that we make goes to missions, so it is sort of business is mission, or maybe mission is business. Back when we were in Ethiopia, we visited a ministry called Change Boys where there were 16 street kids that had been rescued off the street. They are now in a home we are renting, and someone from our congregation is loving them and discipling them and caring from them. Some of the profits from Ebenezer's goes to that.

Well, right next to this coffeehouse is a row house, and that row house was our first office. Are you still with me? All right! Well, back about 12 years ago we were looking for our first office space for the church. It was the summer our second child was born. The spare bedroom in our house had become her bedroom at night and my office by day, and that got real old real fast, and so we were looking for offices. On two occasions we put in contract offers on two different row houses I thought would be perfect, but here is what happened. In both instances, the morning that we put the offers in, we found out that someone had beat us to the punch the night before, and we lost both of those contracts. Okay, now I am a pastor full of faith, and so at that moment I am thinking, "God, have you totally forgotten us?" Being honest, "Can you not hear what I am saying? Are you not hearing my plan for us?"

One day in that frustration or confusion, I am walking home from Union Station. I don't know if you have ever been to D.C., but it is kind of a straight shot from Union Station right down that street to our house, and here is what happened. I was just walking home, and I walk in front of an old crack house, which is now our coffeehouse. I walked right next to 201 "F" Street, this old

row house. There was no For Sale sign, no indication at all, but I felt this interesting prompting. I had met the owner about a year before, and it was like the Holy Spirit kind of dropped him on me. "Robert Thomas, give him a call." Pardon me, but am I losing my mind? I'm not real good at names, so I wondered if that really was the Holy Spirit. I went home, and I'm looking through the White Pages, and there are eight listings for Robert Thomas. I'm like, oh, great! Eeny, meeny, miney, mo , let's call *this* Robert Thomas. I'm feeling kind of foolish the whole time, but I dial the number and a man picks up. I said, "Hey, Robert. This is Mark Batterson calling. I don't know if you would remember me or not. We met about a year ago." He cut me off. He interrupted me. He said, "I was just thinking about you." He said, "I was thinking about putting my row house on the market but before I did, I was wondering if you might want to buy it, but I didn't know how to get ahold of you, and then you called." He said, "Would you want to buy my row house?" I said, "Let me pray about it. Yes!" That row house, which by the way, would now go for \$900,000, we got it for \$225,000. Praise God for that.

Then here is what happened. We buy this row house, and we start laying hands on the walls of our church that about this crack house saying, "God, would you give us this piece of property for Your Glory." And it was that crack house we purchased that ultimately over years of praying is now Ebenezer's Coffeehouse. Last year, net profit \$140,000, and every penny of it going to missions. But where did that start? It always starts in those moments where God prompts you by His Word or by His Spirit, to step out in faith or obedience, and the question is, what are you going to do with that? I love the fact that Cornelius steps out in prayer. Okay, so here is where we are at. Basically right now, we have one guy praying, are you with me? **We have a guy named Cornelius praying. But what happens when two people are praying?** Here we go, verse 9.

⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

I love verse 14. You've got to love Peter, and you've got to love what Peter says.

¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!"

Are you allowed to say that if He is Lord? I am pretty sure if He is Lord that means that you are not allowed to say *no*, kind of by definition. And yet, Peter is kind of wrestling with it because it doesn't make sense to him. Why? Because these were unclean animals. There were Jewish dietary laws that forbade the eating of unclean animals, so this was uncomfortable for Peter. He couldn't even imagine doing this. "Why would I do this?" But here is what it says, "I've never eaten anything impure or unclean."

Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

What do you do in those moments when God asks you to do something you've never done before, to kind of step out of that comfort zone into a place where you know He is calling you?

Now let's be real clear this morning, okay? God is never going to tell you to do anything that would be contrary to this Book. The Bible gives us guardrails, okay? And, by the way, people, a litmus test when it comes to prayer is, it has to be in the will of God for the glory of God. If it is not those two things, it is not going to happen because it is not God's plan. But what happens in those moments when God prompts you to step out? What are you going to do?

I remember years ago when our church was just getting started. Our core group was about 20 people. The total income was \$2,000 a month. That was our entire church income. It cost \$1,600 to rent the D.C. public school where we were meeting, and that left \$400 for salary and all other expenses. We were hurting. At that point I was leading worship. I am not going to sing for you this morning. I wouldn't do that to you. The only thing worse than my voice is my rhythm, and we didn't have a drummer, and so it was just kind of one of those deals where for months we were praying for a drummer. Have you ever prayed for something over and over and over again, kind of like a broken record? We were praying, "God, send us a drummer. Send us a drummer. Send us a drummer." And one day it was kind of like, is the Lord going to say, "Are you going to ask Me yet one more time?" But then it was kind of like the Holy Spirit said, "Go get a drum set, and then maybe I'll send you a drummer." I was like, "Why don't You send us a drummer, and then we'll get the drum set?" That was kind of my deal there. "Here is what we want." The last few words of Mark's Gospel says, "signs following." What we want that to say is "signs preceding." We want preceding signs to make it easy for us, but there was just this kind of moment where I felt like, if I would by faith go out and buy that drum set, the Lord might send us a drummer.

I will never forget, it was a Thursday. Drove out to Silver Spring, Maryland. Bought a drum set. Do you want to guess how much it cost? God is so good at what God does. I'm going to test all of you, \$400 for a drum set? The whole time I'm thinking, this is crazy. Well, that Sunday a Marine walked in, a Marine who was stationed at "8th and I" [8th Street and I Street]. Well, "8th and I" is where the U. S. Drum and Bugle Corps that plays for the President of the United States is stationed. God didn't just send us a drummer. He sent us a rock star! I learned a lesson, and God has tested me on this dozens and dozens of times. There are times when you just have to take that step of faith and do whatever it is God is calling you to do. All right, last couple of verses and we're done,

¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

By the way, what is it with Peter and "three times"? Kind of a magic number, right? It is probably 17 for you, right? God has got to do it 17 times for you, right? I'm like at 101.

¹⁷ While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate.

This is where it gets so good. You can see this divine appointment beginning to happen.

¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them"....

I am just going to pause right here. Remember how crazy it was to think about eating unclean animals? Okay, it just got crazier because the thought of *associating* with someone who is unclean, a Gentile, was unthinkable. It was forbidden, but this is a critical moment in history and in church history. We are about to see what happens. Verse 23:

...The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. ²⁴ The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.

Verse 25, we are going to end with this:

²⁵ As Peter entered the house....

“Why would you end with that?” It seems like the least dramatic verse in the entire story, but I want to suggest that it is the most dramatic! Up until this point in church history, The Way, as it was known, was a sect of Judaism. It was just Jewish believers. What about the Day of Pentecost? Well, those were Jewish pilgrims who were in Jerusalem and had been scattered, the diaspora, if you will. Up until this point, this was a sect of Judaism. But at this moment, Peter goes into Cornelius’ house. Now at the moment Peter enters the house, he is breaking every rule in the Book. He is basically taking his apostle papers and putting them on the table because they are going to be revoked. By the way, he *is* called on the carpet by the council of Jerusalem for doing this, but I just think there are moments in your life when you know God has called you to do something, and if you don’t risk your reputation, you will never establish God’s reputation. This is Peter’s moment.

²⁵ As Peter entered the house,....

Big deal. I’ve entered lots of houses. I’ve basically walked through the door. Sometimes you use a handle. You open the door. You walk in. Big deal. *Huge deal!* This door represents a threshold. This door represents a portal because, are you ready? Your spiritual genealogy is about to be revealed. In this moment when Peter crosses this threshold and enters the house, here it is, “*whomsoever will may come.*”

That is us! There may be some Jewish believers here, but my guess is that most of us are Gentiles. We wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for this moment in history when one apostle has the courage to step into something that was just unthinkable but by faith. Peter knew that Jesus died for the atonement of the sins of all men. In this moment, the Gospel is opened up to everybody, and we are here this morning. Try to understand the gravity of this: we are here this morning, we can do this this morning, because two guys were praying a couple of thousand years ago. And because they were praying, God began to orchestrate this divine appointment.

Let me just state the obvious, Peter and Cornelius. We are talking about relationship, one thing I love about prayer—prayer is the closest distance between two people. Prayer will connect you with people relationally in ways you could connect no other way, and you will meet people that you would have never met any other way but through prayer. Peter and Cornelius should have never met, never, ever, ever met, but God is still seated on His throne. God is still covering the affairs of men. God still orders the footsteps of the righteous; and, if we would hit our knees in prayer, we would find that God would extend His mighty right hand on our behalf. Everybody take a deep breath for me and let it out.

We try to play God, don't we? We try to do for God what only God can do. What if we stopped doing that and just started doing what the Lord has called us to do? God has called us to pray. Jesus said that we have not because we ask not. "Wait, are you saying that God can't do it if I don't pray for it?" No, I am just saying, He *won't* do it. There are just some things God won't do except in answer to prayer. The greatest tragedy in life is the prayers that go unanswered because they go unasked.

Just pray to Him in this moment right now. I don't know your circumstances. I don't know what brought you here this morning. I know that some of you are frustrated and discouraged because there are some prayers you have prayed for a long time, and you haven't seen the answer to those prayers. I can understand that. Is it just because I am a pastor? Our prayer batting average is no better than anybody else's. Swing and miss all the time. Why? Because I am not omniscient. I ask for the wrong things. Sometimes I don't have the patience to prevail in prayer.

It just seems to me like we have two options, to pray or not to pray. How about *to pray*? I am going to seek the glory. I am going to get on my knees. I am going to lift my voice to my Creator and believe that God is still on the throne. As I pray for us this morning, would you just reach out to the Lord in your heart, just reach out to Him. For some of you, I wonder if you just need to extend another invitation for Him to come back into your heart, into your life. Maybe there is something that you stopped praying about and stopped believing. I wonder if there is something that maybe this morning you are here because of, that there is something that you need to do, something you need to put back into God's hands. Something you need to take your hands off and you need to put it back in the hands of God. Let me lead us in prayer.

Father, I thank You this morning. What a joy and privilege it is to be in this church on this morning. God, I pray that Your Word would take root and bear fruit in our hearts. God, I pray that our response to this message would be more than just, "I enjoyed it" or "I appreciate that story." God, I pray that this message would drive us to our knees. God, I pray that You would raise us a praying people, a people who would get on their knees before You. God, I believe that if we do that, we are going to see You move powerfully in our nation, in our generation. God, I pray that You would give us the faith to do it. Lord, right now, remind each one of us. I thank You, Lord, that You are great, not just because nothing is too big, God; You are great because nothing is too small, from the biggest problem, challenge, or obstacle we face to the smallest detail of our lives. You care about all of it. Right now, we give You thanks and praise. In Jesus' Name. Amen!

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.