

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 31 May

Children's Talk: National Day of Prayer

Today is a national day of prayer. That means that today, people all across the nation of South Africa will be praying. In a moment, we too will have a chance to pray. You are used to saying the Lord's Prayer. The older ones have been saying it for years and years. And I hope that you are also used to saying your own prayers. Anytime you talk to God it is a kind of praying, and it is important that we do it regularly throughout the day.

Prayers are important because they are powerful. Jesus taught that anything you pray for, if you believe in it, is possible:

Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. (Mark 11:24)

But if you think about this for a moment, it doesn't seem that way, does it? I'm sure you have prayed for something very hard, and you really thought that the Lord would make it happen, and it didn't. And today, millions of people will be praying for life to get back to normal, and yet it might not for a while yet.

This is because another part of prayer is trusting that the Lord is in charge and that His plan is better than what we ask for. Jesus also taught this. In His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said,

Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done. (Luke 22:42)

Prayer is not about getting our way. Prayer is about giving it all over to the Lord, and trusting that if we don't get what we ask for in prayer, it is because the Lord has a bigger and better plan in the works. So every prayer should come with that idea in it: not what I want, but what You want, Lord.

With that in mind, we are now going to turn to prayer. I will lead us in a prayer, and I hope it can put into words many of the things you are praying in your hearts. It was touching to read the prayers that a few of you sent in. I also encourage you to share your prayers in the comment section right now, or during or after the prayer. I know it might not seem very prayerful to be tapping away at a keyboard, but I do think it matters that it is not just me praying or each of us as individuals. Sharing prayers can bring us together as a community, as we realize that our goals and focuses have so much in common. It need not be elaborate: something as simple as, "I'm praying for healing," or "my prayer is that we return to normal soon" or "Lord, be with those who are suffering." Even if someone else mentions the exact same thing, still share!

The prayer I have prepared is perhaps longer than you are used to. My intent is not to be wordy. But I want to actually give an opportunity to sit in prayer. Not just a few words, but real deep thinking and contemplation. At the end I will give a minute of silence as well, for us all to offer up our silent prayers. Stick with it, if your mind wanders, that's okay; just bring it back to the Lord. I now invite you to bow your heads or to kneel in prayer.

A Prayer for South Africa

Lord Jesus Christ, we come before you today in humble prayer; we thank you for all the blessings that You have given us, for the Love and the Wisdom that fill our minds, and for protection against evil and falsity.

We pray for those who are sick and who have died of the Coronavirus, or who may do so in the future, that you be with them and lift up their spirits and give them hope; hope that you care for them, in both body and in soul; and that should they pass away, you will lead them into your heavenly kingdom, where they will someday again see their loved ones left behind.

We pray for the Doctors, nurses, and hospital staff whose job it is to care for those who are sick. Help them to prepare mentally and spiritually for the task ahead; give them strength to do what is necessary, in a hard time, and especially when they are called on to make decisions for which there is no easy answer. Help them to do their jobs honestly, justly, and faithfully.

We pray for all those serving in so many ways: for those who provide services and food to those in need, for the volunteers working harder than ever for no pay, for the teachers creating a safe space for their students, for the police diligently protecting the people, for each and every person who is stepping up to go above and beyond the call of duty in service to their community and to You.

We pray for all the children and parents; for the children, that you keep them safe from fear and anxiety, and that you preserve their loving innocence; and for the parents that you give them strength to persevere and patience, and to know that their efforts make a difference in the lives of their children.

We pray for the elderly, who are at risk, and have been shut off from physical contact with their family and loved ones for their own safety; we pray that you touch their hearts with your love, that you connect them with a community of angels, and that you grant them patience to endure, knowing that the day will come when they will be free again.

We pray for our leaders, both local and national, that they put behind them selfishness and dishonesty, and strive for the greater good of all the people of South Africa and all of the people in their communities; may they be God fearing and upright, as they make grave decisions that will change people's lives, for better or for worse, for which no matter what they choose someone will hate them. Fill them with Your spirit of leading by serving.

We pray for business owners and workers, who have no idea if a future exists for them economically, who are worried if the businesses they have poured their hearts into will survive; who worry if they will be able to put food on the table for their families; inspire them with the love of being useful, and the dignity of working not just for material things but as a means to serve others.

We pray for the poor and homeless, the most vulnerable, desperate, hungry people, who have not even the basics of what they need to live, who struggle even when

times are plentiful for others; help them know that they are worthy of love and respect; and turn our hearts to serve them even after this crisis has past, to lift them up as best we can when we again receive worldly blessings.

We pray for all the people of South Africa and the world, that you fill them up with goodness and love; that you turn them away from selfishness and protect them from evil; and that you guide us towards your heavenly kingdom.

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built! **Yet regard the prayer of Your servant and his supplication, O LORD my God, and listen to the cry and the prayer which Your servant is praying before You today:** that Your eyes may be open toward this temple night and day, toward the place of which You said, "My name shall be there," that You may hear the prayer which Your servant makes toward this place. And may You hear the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. Hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive. (1Kings 8:27-30)

Amen.

How You Doin'?

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

17 May, 2020

As a day of prayer and reflection, I think it is useful to take our time this morning sitting back and reflecting on how we are doing. It has now been a few months since we all realized that we would probably face coronavirus here in South Africa. It's been over 60 days in one form of lockdown or another. As we move into the next phase tomorrow, and many of us try to get back to a new normal, we are probably all aware of our mixed thoughts and feelings. As we assess where we are now, it becomes important that we not neglect the spiritual side of things. So how are you doing? Not just externally, but deeply, spiritually? How are you doing?

In itself, this is an important question that we ask ourselves from time to time. But we can elevate our perspective if we make it about more than self-assessment and realize that it is a question that the Lord asks of us. He wants to know how we are doing. With that in mind, we turn to the story from the Lord's Word for today. It is the story of a servant named Hagar, her mistreatment and the hands of her mistress, and the questions the Lord asked of her when she fled into the wilderness.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "See now, Jehovah has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her." And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes.

Then Sarai said to Abram, "My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. Jehovah judge between you and me."

So Abram said to Sarai, "Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please." And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence.

Now the Angel of Jehovah found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. And He said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?" (Genesis 16:1-8)

We'll get to Hagar's answers in a moment, but I want to start with that question, and exactly how it is phrased: "where have you come from, and where are you going?" It's broader and deeper than just asking, "how are you doing?" It speaks to understanding how you got to where you are and where you're headed in the future. So imagine that the Lord directly asked you that question: "where have you come from, and where are you going?"

Now at first glance it seems like an odd question for the Lord to ask. Doesn't He already know the answer? He does of course. But by asking directly, He elicits a response that is revealing. In answering we have an opportunity to reflect both on what we know about ourselves and our situation and where the gaps are, and it invites us to look to Him for deeper answers. The Teachings of the New Church

explain just how intimately familiar the Lord is with how we are doing, even though He asks as if He were altogether ignorant:

That 'he said, Hagar, Sarai's servant-girl' means information is clear from the train of thought, for Hagar is addressed by the angel as if she were to inform him of something. In the Word, even though Jehovah knows already, it is common for Jehovah to question someone and for people to make replies to Him. He knows not only what took place but also the causes and the ends, thus every least intimate detail. But since a person is not aware of this and believes that nobody else can possibly know what he does in secret, and still less what he thinks, that which takes place therefore does so in accordance with his belief. But the truth of the matter is that even quite common and ordinary spirits perceive a person's thoughts better than the person does himself. Angelic spirits perceive the more interior aspects of his thoughts, and angels those that are more interior still, that is to say, the causes and the ends in view about which the person himself knows but little. This I have been given to know from much and continuing experience lasting for many years. Since spirits and angels perceive those things, what then must the perception be of the Lord or Jehovah, who is Infinite, and who enables all others to perceive? (*Secrets of Heaven* §1931)

The Lord already knows how you are doing far better than you do yourself. This is why it is so important that when we do an assessment of how we are doing, we don't just do it as a solo exercise by ourselves. We are surprisingly bad judges of how we are doing; and the deeper we try to look the harder it becomes.

You might be able to assess the world around you: my job is going ok, my relationship with my parents is pretty fractious, I'm getting frustrated with the kids sometimes but mostly their ok, and I'm finding things to keep myself busy. Looking inward is a bit messier, with less ability to get perspective: am I excited or nervous? I feel angry, but maybe I'm actually scared? Some days everything feels like it will turn out fine and others it feels like everything is collapsing around me. Deeper still is our spiritual state: am I connecting with the Lord or pushing Him away? Am I letting heavenly love for others motivated me or am I letting selfishness run my life on autopilot? Am I doing enough of the right things or not? Or am I even doing too much? It is only by inviting the Lord's perspective that we get a glimpse of the full picture. As Hagar says later in the story, "You are God, who sees me." God sees us as we truly are, and under His guidance we can wade through the maze of self-reflection and see some of that true picture as well. As an aside, allow the Lord to guide this process without putting your finger on the scale as it were: when taking an honest look, even a brutally honest look, at ourselves, we can be so wary of arrogantly seeing what is good that we tilt any interpretation towards the bad. Brutal honesty sometimes means letting the Lord show you the good that He has blessed you with, good that you have self-consciously ignored.

Turning back to the question at hand, let's look at the two parts: where have you come from and where are you going? Interestingly, Hagar answers only the first half of the question: it is the Lord who tells her where she should be going. Likewise, I think it is much easier for us to see where we have come from than it is to see where the Lord is directing us to go. So in prayerful checking in with how you are doing, also ask where have you come from? What state were you in spiritually last week? A few weeks before that? When lockdown first started? As you anticipated

and planned for the start of lockdown? As the first news of coronavirus was breaking? Back in January as you thought about what 2020 would be like for you? As I look back I know for myself I do see some things that I've let slip that I want to work on building back up again spiritually, that have contributed to where I am now; but I also see some areas that have improved dramatically, in which I am in a much better place spiritually. By seeing where I am coming from spiritually I have a better understanding of how I'm doing right now, and a greater appreciation for it.

In the case of Hagar, when she looked back she only could see what she was fleeing: "She said, 'I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai'" (Genesis 16:8). She was silent as to where she was heading. Having looked back at where you have come from, you may find that there have been some hard times and you don't seem to have a sense of where the Lord is taking you. If so, this next part may resonate with you. In the absence of Hagar answering where she was going, the angel provides direction; and the first part of the direction is the opposite of what Hagar wanted to hear:

The Angel of Jehovah said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand." Then the Angel of Jehovah said to her, "I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude." And the Angel of Jehovah said to her:

"Behold, you *are* with child,
And you shall bear a son.
You shall call his name Ishmael,
Because Jehovah has heard your affliction.
He shall be a wild man;
His hand *shall be* against every man,
And every man's hand against him.
And he shall dwell in opposition to all his brethren."
(Genesis 16:9-12)

Hagar was trying to get as far away from her mistress as possible. The Lord told her to go the opposite direction: she still had to submit to that hard situation for a time. But after that time, she would bear a son, a blessing from the Lord, because the Lord had heard her affliction.

It almost seems worse to know that our immediate future will be challenging than to be ignorant of the future. But sometimes the Lord directs us back into the fray, back into the situations we are struggling with, back into the challenges we want to run away from, and He directs us to compel ourselves, even if just for a time, to do the things we want to escape. This state is reminiscent of the Lord's as He faced His own crucifixion. When Peter suggested He might avoid all the hardship and pain, Jesus rebuked Him:

You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." (Matthew 16:23)

Our state of mind may look dire and bleak from our own earthly perspective. But if the Lord is challenging us to dive back into it, then it is because from His Divine perspective there is a better state waiting on the other side. This is not to say we should automatically throw ourselves at hard things blindly. It is to say that if we lift our minds to the things of God, and check how we are to move forward given our

current spiritual state, at times the next step He will show us is to soldier on, continuing to bear our current burdens, but now enlivened with the promise of new life on the other side.

I hope today you are able to take the time to seriously consider how you are doing. Not just in terms of the world around you, not just in terms of your immediate thoughts and feelings, but deeply, on a spiritual level. In this process, make sure to bring the Lord into it. Examine yourself from His point of view, and with everything you see, both good and bad, offer it back up to Him in answer. Expand your view from simply today, and notice how you got to where you are, and all the up and downs that brought you here; and then look forward, to whatever future the Lord is leading you to. Then return to real life: your problems won't magically go away, but you will have a perspective that will help you overcome them.