

Prayer

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[0 : 00] Can we turn back to Matthew chapter 27 very briefly to the passage that we read, Matthew chapter 27 from verse 45.

And particularly verse 51 this evening, which is going to, I hope, explain or express for us our theme, from which we will develop our theme.

And behold, speaking of the crucifixion of Jesus, the death of Jesus, behold the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Now in our evening worship over these last number of weeks, we've been looking at the theme of worship and particularly this public act of worship that we've engaged in, Sunday to Sunday, because it's important, isn't it, that when we come together to worship and we do what we do in worship, and there's various different elements of worship, that we have an understanding and an appreciation of what we're doing and why we're doing it.

And this evening the theme is prayer. So I'm not going to look at the generality of prayer and how important prayer is as a general truth, which is significant. But I'm going to especially look at why we pray in a church service, and why we come together to pray.

[1 : 23] And it may be a part of that service that you think, again, well, it's kind of significant for the minister, because he's leading in prayer or whoever's leading in prayer.

But the rest of us can kind of just switch off at that point. I hope that that isn't the case, and I hope to suggest why it's important that we understand a little bit about prayer.

Very important part of our worship, Neil, has already prayed twice this evening in our public worship. Why do we do this? Why is it important that we're praying?

And what is it saying about us? What's it saying to us? And what does it say about our relationship with God? Well, I think the first thing that's very important in our prayer life as a congregation, when we pray together, it's a reflection of our identity.

It's reminding us who we are. It's reminding us and speaking to us about who we are. We are a people who come together. We are a community who come together for whom the barrier between ourselves and God has gone.

[2 : 36] And each time we pray, we're reminding ourselves of that as Christians. We're saying the barrier that exists between ourselves and God is gone.

Now much of what we do in this life, much of the relationships we have or don't have are based on barriers, are based on divisions.

Some of them are fairly natural, but often much of this life, and Neil was praying about different things that cause us pain or heartache in this life, many of the barriers are separating barriers between ourselves so that we have social barriers, relational barriers, trade barriers, we're thinking a lot about that just now with Brexit, sexual barriers, ethnic barriers, political barriers, all kinds of barriers, and very often we are marked out by these different kind of divisions and separations. And much of that reflects the problem and the difficulty inherently in humanity in our sinful human nature, and it reflects the barrier between ourselves and God, and the separation that exists naturally between ourselves and God.

Excuse me, I'm going to take my jacket off because this thing is doing my head in. My ear's going to fall off. That might be fun, but it might not add to the experience of worship for me.

[4 : 04] So it reflects our identity, okay, and we remember that naturally there's a separation between ourselves and God, a barrier between ourselves.

Sin has caused that barrier. The most fundamental of all relationships with our Creator and our God has been broken because of sin, and it's a judicial separation.

He is so holy, He is so pure, He is so perfect that He cannot relate to us unless our sin is dealt with, unless our sin is in some way cleansed and taken away.

It's an exclusion order that we get from God in Isaiah 59 and verse 2. I think we have that clearly stated, but your iniquities have made a separation between you and God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.

So this is God. He is not hearing us in our natural condition because sin creates that great barrier. But what I want to say this evening and remind you of as you all know is that Christ becomes our barrier.

[5 : 17] Christ becomes the barrier between ourselves and God. In other words, what I mean by that is He stands between ourselves and God.

He stands in that place, and He is ripped apart through His atoning death on the cross so that access with God can be opened.

So He becomes the barrier, and in His death, that judicial death and that carrying of sin, He takes away the guilt, and the ways opened up through Himself, through the body of Jesus Christ will be celebrating and remembering later.

But Hebrews 10 where we read in verse 20, it reminds us of that. We have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way that He is open to us through the curtain that is His flesh.

So that barrier that exists between ourselves and God is symbolised as a curtain, and it is a curtain that represents His body. Tonight is a good night because there are lots of pictures, there is lots of symbolism, there is bread and there is wine, and salvation is symbolised by a ripped curtain this evening, because God understands that we need these visual things to help us understand.

[6 : 52] So we are taken back from Hebrews 10 where we read, which is a glorious few chapters around Hebrews 10. We are taken back to Matthew 27, 51, where we have this important picture, this important event that happens when Jesus died, where the temple of the curtain is huge, 80 foot high curtain is ripped into from top to bottom, and is symbolic of division.

So it is symbolic, the curtain is there because it symbolises all that we have said about our condition before God. It reminds us visibly and pictorially that there is a great big barrier naturally between ourselves and God, and the temple curtain separated the rest of the temple, or the tabernacle, from the holy of holies, where God's presence was symbolised most profoundly.

And inside the holy of holies seated the ark of the covenant with its mercy seat. And that was the symbol of God's presence. When they were in the desert, when they were on the move, the ark of the covenant was what symbolised that God was with them as a people.

It was a symbol. He wasn't living in the ark. He wasn't contained in a box. But it was a symbol, it was a picture. He's not in the bread and the wine, it's a symbol and it's a picture for us.

But it helped that Old Testament people that wherever they carried the ark, God was with them. And when they stopped somewhere, the tabernacle, the worshipping building, had a holy of holies where God dwelt.

[8 : 39] And then they built the temple and they made a holy of holies which was a perfect cube. And then it was the ark of the covenant. And it symbolised God's presence.

And covering that room was this great big curtain which separated this holy and pure and perfect God from his people. The only access to this God was through a representative who was the High Priest.

You know that, we know that don't we? That the High Priest stood for the people of the Old Testament and he walked into the holy of holies once a year having fulfilled all kinds of requirements to be clean and to have new clothes and to recognise that this was a kind of very dangerous thing he was doing.

And he sacrificed a bull for his own sins without the sharing of blood. There is no forgiveness of sins, why? Because life for life, if we are to live then there needs to be a death in order for us to live life for life.

And there was two goats, animal sacrifice, symbol. It wasn't that they enabled God to be atoned for our sin but they pointed forward to the fact that one day God would shed his blood on our behalf, on the cross.

[10 : 02] But there was two goats, one for the sins of the people whose blood would be shed and one on whom the priest laid his hands and confessed the sins of the people.

And the goat was sent out into the desert, banished, separated, put away from the people and from God.

And all of these symbols, all of these pictures spoke very powerfully of our condition and of what Jesus would come to do. In a certain way, on a certain day, the blood of these animals was sprinkled over the people and over the temple.

There was a price to pay. There was a God who was holy and just who needed to be satisfied in terms of justice, that the price for rebellion and sin was paid for.

And of course that day of atonement, Yom Kippur day is also, or the other day, sacrificial day like the Passover, all speak, all point forward to something that they're not an end in themselves.

[11 : 11] They're not religious rituals that just carry on. They were pointing forward to Jesus, the Passover, the lamb without blemish, the lentils being covered, sin being dealt with, the firstborn being saved.

All of it points forward to Jesus Christ. So there's this sense in which we're reminded in the crucifixion story and in the curtain being ripped into that Christ becomes our barrier.

Remember Hebrews 10 again, he's the one who a new and living way is opened up through him.

The curtain is split back, it speaks of Jesus opening away for us into the presence of God.

So the death of Jesus Christ, which we read about there, introduces that great new covenant which we will celebrate in the Lord's Supper shortly in Hebrews chapter 12 verse 22.

It speaks about that you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to the innumerable angels and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant whose sprinkle blood speaks better than the blood of Abel.

[12 : 26] So it's all, Hebrews is great because it has all this Hebraic language that speaks back into the Old Testament sacrificial system because it all points forward to Jesus and we relate to it through that.

He is our high priest, our perfect high priest and he enters not into a man made temple but he enters into the sanctuary, into the presence of God himself.

So all of it points forward. Jesus enters into the presence as our mediator and Hebrews 10, 7 says, here I am. So Jesus enters into God's presence as the lamb, as the goat, as the sacrifice, as the one who sheds his blood, as the one who opens up the way so that there needn't be any, once for all, there needn't be any more high priestly entering into a secluded holy of holies.

That barrier that we spoke of at the beginning has been removed. The death that goes with it and the separation that goes or the death that goes with our separation from God is dealt with in Jesus Christ.

And the great thing for us is that therefore we have confidence this evening. Hebrews 10 again reminds us of that from verse 19 forward.

[13 : 53] Therefore since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way that is opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh, since we have a great high priest, let us draw near with true heart and full assurance of faith and so on.

So the rest of that chapter speaks about why we can enter God's presence, which is ultimately prayer, but it's more than prayer, it's ongoing relationship with Him, but we can enter into that presence as children, as inheritors, indwelling spirit, significantly righteous because of the work of Jesus Christ, favoured, fully assured with hope, knowing that His faithfulness will never leave us able to do love and good deeds, meeting together as that chapter goes on to say, encouraging one another.

So there's huge consequences of being able to enter into the holy of holies, into the direct presence of God and primarily we'll look briefly at that, that we do it through prayer.

If you have time this evening, do go through at least half of the book of Hebrews, it's a magnificent explanation of why God did what he did in the Old Testament because it points forward to the finished work of Jesus which applies to us all in our lives and enables us to worship and understand the Lord's Supper and understand why we pray.

So we pray in worship because it reflects our new identity as a people for whom the barrier between ourselves and God has been removed and as a people individually and together who have communion with the Father.

[15 : 45] We're all priests together. You know Hebrews speaks about that, speaks about the priesthood of all, we're all priests because we can all walk into God's presence, you can speak to God at any time.

There needn't be an elaborate ritual for you to speak with God. Indeed he longs for us all to recognise our priesthood and to speak to Him, to enter that holy of holies.

That is the new and living way that's been opened by Jesus Christ and it reflects our identity. We have access, access. So each of us have access into God's presence and isn't it discouraging that we spend so much time not praying in our lives?

Although the access has been made in this incredibly costly way by God Himself, by God the Son. We have access.

And so on a Sunday when we gather together the leaders will lead in acts of prayer and part of that is acknowledging who we are, acknowledging our relationship with God, acknowledging that He is worthy of our worship, that He is the King of kings to all of us as we worship, that we have been reconciled and when we pray together God is important to us and we need Him, I think Neil made that very clear in his prayers this evening that reminded us of our need to come into His presence. [17:16] Together it's an acknowledgement together. So when we pray in public worship or when we pray in private or when we pray in the engine room, when we all pray together, we're remembering the incredible vista that we now have, the perspective that we now have that we can enter as people into the holy of holies.

We have a spiritual Pandora's box. In other words, eternal dimensions are opened up to us when we pray and when we speak to God and our public prayers will speak different truths and will speak different aspects of what it means and will speak in different dimensions of what it means to be Christians together.

So I would encourage you and they should never be ritualistic, Sam, prayer, reading, Sam, prayer, sermon, Sam, prayer, whatever it might be, it mustn't be simply for as a ritual, obviously there's an order to what we do, but when we pray it's encouraging, we are encouraged as leaders, as those who are leading in prayer and forgive me if it's not the case, sometimes, that we are thoughtful and prepared in our prayers.

And as we hear these prayers, we're not simply listening to a prayer, but we're seeking to pray with the leader as he prays.

So it isn't a time for us to switch off or to take time out or to daydream. It is a time when we can say our amen to the prayers and we can engage in these prayers as we listen.

[18:56] And it is important for us as leaders, and I say that to all who lead in worship or lead in prayer or indeed pray at any public meeting, the importance of being, yes, spontaneous, but also prepared, it's a bit of a contradiction, but be purposeful, be varied, be educated, think through prayers because they're important, we prepare our sermons and it's important that we prepare, at least in our minds, where we are going with prayer and why we are going to pray in a certain area.

So I'm just very briefly going to mention a few different kind of prayers that are offered on a Sunday and why they are significant for all of us to recognize and know and what it means for us together. When we pray, we are worshiping and invoking God's presence. In Psalm 127 verse 1 we have that word if we have on screens.

No. Okay, Psalm 127 verse 1, if you don't know it, says unless the builder builds a house, the house is built in vain.

And there's that recognition in that Psalm immediately that we invoke God, God's presence in our worship because without Him it is an empty ritual and we rely on God in our worship.

[20:19] We can't do nothing of spiritual worth without Him and we come in humility and dependence and we glorify Him for who He is.

It gives us, in other words, perspective. But then as we also see and we also recognize, there is confession in our prayers. In John 1 verse 9, if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

I think that's a very important dimension in public prayer that there's a public confession, not a listing of our sins, but there's a sense that we come together and we come together as sinners who are saved by grace.

We don't come in our own goodness, in our own righteousness, but in other words we are stating that we are a different community and we are a community who lives on the fumes of forgiveness, not only from God but towards one another.

And when we worship, then we will grieve the Spirit of God in our worship if there is not a spirit of forgiveness. And so the confession of our sins and the recognition of who we are is hugely significant in worship.

[21 : 34] The vertical reality governs our horizontal responses and corporate confession and prayer says we know who we are.

We know. We know that we fail but we're forgiven. We are the people of a second chance. We are the people who will be patient and empathetic with one another.

So there's confession, there's also illumination in John 14, 26, and again we will say these things and pray these things at different points in our worship. But the helper of the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send him and it will teach you all things, bringing remembrance all that I've said to you. And we're asking when we pray that the Holy Spirit will be our teacher, that we will learn together in our active worship, that we are ready to hear and that we seek His wisdom and His guidance to guide, comfort, rebuke and encourage.

We will also pray prayers of thanksgiving when Thessalonians 5, 18 in all circumstances give thanks for this is the will of God or Christ.

[22 : 49] We'll do it at the end of a sermon. We will give thanks for the word for God and the Spirit speaking to us. We'll give thanks if we've taken up an offering.

Corey mentioned this morning the amount that was raised for the Starling church plan. We stop and we give thanks for that. We give thanks for those who lead in the worship, who sing and who pray and who deal with the practical realities of what we are and what we do.

We give thanks for who He is. When I was growing up, it doesn't happen now, but when I was growing up in our house after dinner, we would say grace before dinner and after dinner we would return thanks.

That doesn't happen much now. It's quite sad, I think. We should reinstate that. The returning of thanks for what we've received and for the communion of being together over a meal. Returning thanks is a great thing.

We give thanks, a baptism for the baby who enters into the covenant community or for the adult who comes to faith in Jesus Christ.

[23 : 59] We give thanks at the Lord's Supper for the symbols of His body and blood. That is a corporate thing. We do it together. Why is that important?

Because very often there will be times when we don't feel like giving thanks, when we don't feel this sense of warmth and thanksgiving. It's good to have our perspective widened and reminded that there are reasons to be thankful.

Lastly, and very briefly, we also pray, Pastoral prayers, Ephesians 6, 18, praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and the supplication to that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.

When we are praying in public, we are praying a supplicated, a pastoral prayer because we are a body of people together and there is a representative prayer on behalf of the people.

It can be an example, it can be a trigger, it can be a reflection that we are people who want to rejoice with those who rejoice, who mourn with those who mourn and that we reflect that as a community.

[25 : 13] With God as our Father and we speak together of care and of praying with a spiritual bond for one another, asking for matters to pray for, maybe particularly say in the engine room when we meet together downstairs, and we pray more personally and more intimately for one another's needs, for the world in which we live, for the gospel, for mission, for a multitude of things we come together because there is power in that sense of access that God has given us through Jesus Christ.

A curtain is removed, the barrier has gone, we pray in Jesus' name. It's the greatest privilege for us as individuals and also as a congregation.

And it is, I know it doesn't seem like that most of the time for us and we should maybe do more about that, it is participatory. When someone's praying for the front, you are also joining in that.

And when we sometimes pray through our songs, one of the songs we sung this evening earlier, Sam 25, it's a prayer, and so we all participate in that prayer together as we sing.

Occasionally we will repeat a prayer together, sometimes the Lord's prayer, and that reminds us of who we are together. And they also think it's good to be silent together and pray, there's a power in that.

[26 : 49] And the Lord's table when the elements are going round, it's usually a beautiful time of silence unless some wretched piper starts piping just for the two minutes that we're bred in the

winds going round.

But generally there's a beautiful piece and it allows us to pray. And there's a beauty, you know how it is when you're comfortable with someone, you don't need to speak to them all the time, you're comfortable with silence.

It's good to be comfortable with silent prayer together before God. And there is a, there's a communality and a bonding as we are silent together.

So over all of that we say amen. And we believe it to be true, who God is, and prayer together is the truest act that we will ever engage in.

So be it. The barrier has gone. Price has paid the price as we trust and rely and look to him as you will participate in the bread and the wine.

[27 : 55] Remember that the barrier is broken through his, he is the way. He is the curtain that has been ripped, constantly ripped in half in order for us to enter into the presence of the Most High God.

Amen. Now we're going to sing together before we participate with each other in the Lord's supper. We're going to sing a Psalm, Psalm 65, and it's remembrance of the one into whose presence we come and sing and pray. In Zion praise the way she Lord to your vows will pay to you all people will come near you hear us when we pray.

Let's stand together as we sing this Psalm. In Zion praise the way to you Lord to you our vows will pay to you all people will come near you hear us when we pray when we were overwhelmed by sins and guilt upon us lay you pardoned all our trespasses and washed our guilt away our blessed are those you choose and bring within your courts of grace we're filled with blessings in your house in your most holy place with awesome deeds of righteousness you answer us oh God our Savior hope of found our blessings and all the earth of road.

Please be seated. First Corinthians chapter 11 and verse 23 says to us that I received from the Lord what I delivered to you that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks he broke it and said this is my body which is for you do this in remembrance of me in the same way also he took the cup after supper saying this cup is the new covenant in my blood do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me there's often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes so we will do that shortly and please remember why we do this it is to remember Jesus and remember what he's done for you and remember what he's done for us and remember that he will return because he's a living Savior we are proclaiming the significance of his death for us and the beauty of that ripped curtain that separation the barrier not only between ourselves and God but we share at Lord supper we share because the barriers have been removed between us as well and therefore we pray against barriers and we pray for forgiveness if we have caused barriers among each other and we pray that we will not be a cause ourselves being a barrier and that we will forgive others who we feel have sinned against us because we are united in Christ and to whom much has been given much will be expected and when we are forgiven much we recognize that we also forgive so let's pray and give thanks Father God we do rejoice and give thanks in you and in your salvation we rejoice in this symbolic offering of worship that we can participate in we thank you for the picture of the curtain ripped into symbolizing your own way to God through your body through your finished work on the cross through your death and it's a toning significance and it's awesome commitment of love to us forgive us when we don't see our need we don't see the ugliness of sin and our silence before you and our lack of communication and our hurtfulness towards you or others and help us this evening to make a fresh start as we need to do every day in Christ we examine ourselves and remind ourselves of how great God is so we thank you for the bread and the wine the symbols of your body and blood and we thank you that we share these elements together and may that be a mark of our identity in Jesus Christ the barrier between ourselves and our God having been removed so may we rejoice and grant us just that privilege of a few moments of silent prayer together in Jesus name.
[34 : 21] Amen.