

Pray with Persistence, Pray because of Persistence

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, we're going to today finish off what has been a very short study on prayer. The last two Sundays and today we're looking together at this subject which is one that we want to keep coming back to regularly because prayer is something that every Christian and every church needs to do and yet at the same time I think we all would admit if we're honest that prayer is something that every Christian and that every church struggles to do. So we're thinking about prayer together and the title for our series has been poor, please persist and we're using these words to help us think more and more about this great topic. We've started each week with a question how does the word prayer make you feel and and we're saying does it make you feel pressure or peace, guilt or gladness, failure or freedom, doubt or delight, cynicism or satisfaction and we're putting these up because very often if you're like me you're on the red side and you think of prayer you think I don't do it enough and I'm not really good at it and I'm not even sure, not confident and so often that's where we find ourselves and it's become more and more characterised by peace, gladness, freedom, delight and satisfaction. Our three words poor, please and persist are helpful in enabling us to understand more about the nature of prayer, what it is, about the practice of prayer, how we do it and the purpose of prayer, why we should do it. A couple of weeks ago we looked at that word poor and we said that that's a really good definition of prayer, prayer is pouring out your heart to God. In other words when we pray we can just be open before God, in fact prayer is the one place where we really can be ourselves. It also helps us to think about how to pray, that's all you do, you just talk to God and pour your heart out in front of him, it's okay if our prayers are messy and it reminds us about why we pray because it's reminding us that as we pour our hearts out to God it makes room in our hearts for him to fill us, to pour his love into us and you. Last week we looked at the word please, we saw that in prayer we are pleading, we're saying to God please, we're bringing our concerns, our needs, our desires before God, pleading with him to help us to have mercy on us, to be at work among us. We also saw that prayer is pleasing so it's not meant to be an unpleasant thing, it's actually meant to be a break in the clouds, a song in the storm, a place of rest and comfort as we stumble on in our Christian lives and most of all we saw last week that in prayer God is pleased. We're praying five times a day in order to get up to the right standard before God, not at all.

We're not trying to avert God's frown by praying, instead we're coming to him to enjoy his smile. Today we come to the last part of our little series and we're looking at the word persist and we read two parables, murder read two parables that speak about this and we're going to refer back to them but I want us to take our focal point for today from Psalm 130 which I'll just read just now. Out of the depths I cried to you, O Lord, O Lord hear my voice, let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy. If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand, but with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits and in his word I hope my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than the watchmen for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him is plentiful redemption and he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. We're going to think about this under two headings, pray with persistence, pray because of persistence. So thinking first about praying with persistence, Psalm 130 is a beautiful combination because on the one hand you've got this very raw and honest cry to God. The guy, the Psalmist writing this, the

Psalm is in the depths crying out to God for help and yet at the same time you've got and so although the Psalm is very short, there's a lot of very rich and wonderful teaching contained in it. There's loads we could pick out. I just want to pick out three things just now, all of which are the moments when the Psalmist uses the pronoun I. You see it in verse one, I cry to you. You see it in verse five, I wait for the Lord and then at the end of verse five, I hope. I want to highlight those because all three of those statements are the language of persistence. So I cry, the Psalmist is crying out to God from the depths. So this is not a prayer, this Psalms not a prayer when things are going well. This is a prayer in the midst of struggle and fear and he's making this urgent appeal to God. It's not a token gesture. The Psalmist is urgently crying out to the Lord. I wait in verse five and six. It's reminding us that answers to prayers don't come instantly and he's having to wait. He's looking for an answer. He's persevering in the midst of trial because he knows only God can help him. And then the language of hope, I hope in the Lord and in particularly in

God's word. My hope is in his word and we're seeing there that the Psalmist is resting on the reality of what God has communicated to him. Now that word hope is actually very easy to misunderstand because we can use that word hope in the idea of being optimistic and unsure. So all of us, we're not hoping anymore. And you know, we were hoping even though we kind of knew it wouldn't happen, but we were still hoping, but then it didn't happen. But hope is often like this optimistic thinking, oh maybe the Bible does not use the word hope in that way. In scripture, the word hope is much, much more concrete. It's a sense of expectation that what God says is coming will come. And this is the pattern that you can see in this Psalm. The Psalmist reinforces the fact that with God there is forgiveness, there is steadfast love, there is redemption and on the basis of these truths he is hoping in the Lord. The great point being emphasized by all of that is that all these things I cry, I wait, I hope, all of it requires persistence. Crying, waiting, hoping, all requires persistence and it's all teaching us that we need to pray with persistence. And that's the point that

Jesus makes so powerfully in the parables that Myrtle read to us. In fact, Luke makes it very clear. I was going to skip through those verses as I went, but never mind. Here we are. Luke 18, that's the purpose that he told the parable. He told them a parable to the fact that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

[7 : 30] Now this is a fascinating parable because it's very interesting, both of these parables, Jesus is teaching us about something about God, but in them the person representing God has another friend comes to them at midnight for bread and they're like, I've got to get out of bed. And then you read about an unjust judge. A widow comes to him and the judge doesn't fear God or respect man and yet still because this woman keeps badgering him, eventually he will give her justice. So the images he uses are actually quite negative, but what Jesus is doing here is what's known as an A40 orei, I don't know if I spell it, a 40 orei argument. I think I put one too many eyes in there. There's no idea. Ignore that one. In other words, it's a how much more than argument that's being used. So the argument is if a bad judge will help a widow and if a friend who doesn't want to get out of bed will actually help their friend, how much more will a good God answer your prayers? So that A40 orei, that how much more than argument is being used here to teach us that God, the loving wise, holy, good father, will hear and will answer. And all of that is teaching us to pray with persistence. And that's incredibly important to think about because if we're honest, being persistent in prayer can be really difficult. And I've often experienced it, I'm sure you have as well, where there's things that you want to pray for and you pray and nothing happens. And you pray a bit more and nothing happens. And so maybe you've been praying for something for a long time, maybe you've been praying for someone to come to faith, maybe you've been praying for help with a sin that you're struggling with, maybe you've been praying for somebody who's unwell, maybe you're praying about your own health, maybe you're praying about some struggles and difficulties that you've had earlier in your life, maybe you're praying about your job or your studies or about where to live, maybe you're praying for a husband or a wife or for children or whatever it may be, maybe you've been praying for a long time and maybe it feels like nothing's happening. And that can be really, really difficult. That's something I think that every Christian experiences at times.

And maybe we can find ourselves thinking, well, if things are going well, then it's easy to pray persistently. But if things are going badly, sometimes their motivation drains away and sometimes we feel like giving up.

The thing I want us to notice is that persistence in prayer doesn't actually depend on things going well. Persistence in prayer, in fact, can be motivated and encouraged by both the highs and the lows of our spiritual experience. The Psalm is a mixture of both. You see, highs and lows struggle and promises good and bad. And so often our experience is the same. It's a mix of highs and lows. Sometimes in our Christian lives, we feel confident. We feel like the windows in our sails, things are going well. Other times we're full of doubts and we think, I don't even know if I am a Christian. I don't even know if I believe in God. I'm not sure. Sometimes we feel patient and so wait. Other times we feel impatient and we're like, oh, I just need to know this answer. Sometimes we feel like we know what's going on. We're looking at our circumstances and we think, yeah, I can see everything fitting together. And other times life is so full of uncertainty. And we think, I don't know what's going on. This doesn't make sense. The life of discipleship will bring all of these things. This week will no doubt bring all of these things. But these kind of experiences, confidence, doubts, patience, impatience, knowledge, uncertainty, what I want us to see is that all of them can fuel our motivation to persist in prayer. So when we feel confident, we can use that strength to keep knocking at God's door, confident in all that he can do. When we're full of doubts, when we know that we can't do anything ourselves, we can go straight to God and plead with him for help. When we feel patient, we can keep faithfully praying, patiently waiting, trusting God.

When we feel impatient, we can run even faster to God and ask him to act. When we feel that we understand things, that our knowledge is all fitting together. Those are the times when we will know that we need to keep praying that he's the one in whom we find our answers. And when we feel uncertain in those moments, we will pray because we don't know what else we can do. And it's all reminding us that all of our experiences, perhaps especially the struggles and the lows, these can be used by God to fuel our desire to pray with persistence. And this is such an important lesson for discipleship, for whether you are a Christian, whether you become a Christian, this is such an important thing to remember that when things are going well, we need to run to Jesus to thank Him, to praise Him, to rejoice in Him, and to ground all the successes and joys in our lives in the relationship with Him. When things are going well, we need to run to Him. And when things are going wrong, when we stuff things up, when we react badly at work or at home to our family, when we do something that we regret, when we feel low and flat, in those moments, we need to do exactly the same thing. We run to

Jesus. We run to Him for comfort, for help, for shelter, for renewal. In other words, no matter how brilliantly or how badly things are going, just go to Jesus, go straight to Him, run to Him. He's the one we need in all of these circumstances. And this is a great reminder for us that the danger to our prayer lives is not when things are going well and it's not when things are going badly. The real danger to our prayer lives is when we're just not that bothered about how things are going. And that's brought out by a word that I love and you see it in Luke 18. You've got the word here, bother, and the word here, bothering. The widow and the friend were bothered about their situations and that then led them to go and bother the judge and the friend who had bread.

[14 : 36] And it's reminding us that perseverance, persistence, and prayer doesn't really come from being all super holy or being all knowledgeable or being impressive in your spiritual lives. It just comes from being bothered. And that's the question we have to ask. Not are you sorted? Is everything great in your life? But are you bothered? Are we bothered? Now, I don't mean bothered in terms of like lazy, you know, can you be bothered? I don't mean in those sense. I mean in terms of troubled. Are we troubled by stuff? Are we troubled enough to bother God? As believers, are we are we bothered about our spiritual maturity? Are we troubled about the unity of the church? Are we bothered about the people in our community who don't know Jesus? And if you're not a Christian yet or not sure, are you are you bothered by that question? What is my relationship with God?

Are you are you bothered by thoughts of eternity? Are you bothered about heaven and hell? Are you bothered about what you build your life on? And I hope that you all are and I hope that you will use that botheredness to motivate persistence.

In the depths, he was in a low moment. He was bothered by everything that was going on and he used that as fuel to cry out to God. And to put it another way, it's all just reminding us that when it comes to prayer, don't ever give up. So for everyone here who is a believer and following Jesus, keep praying, keep praying that you will grow in your faith, keep praying for family and friends, keep praying for one another, keep praying for missionary partners connected to us, keep praying that the gospel will shape every part of your life, keep praying that you would know more and more of God's love in your heart. When things go well, keep praying. When things go wrong, keep praying, keep praying. And if you're maybe not sure or not yet a believer, first and foremost, start praying. Start praying.

And that is simply talking to God. It's simply pouring your heart out to God. It's simply laying it all in front of him. Start praying and keep praying and don't give up. Keep praying. Keep praying and especially if you are praying that the Lord would save you. Keep praying and remember the amazing promise that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Don't ever exchange persistence for resistance. It's so easy to do that. I've been praying for ages, nothing's happened.

I'm not gonna do it. Whether things are going well, whether things are going badly, whether you're just not really sure where you stand, all of that is fuel for prayer. We've got to pray with persistence. But we've also got to recognize that we pray because of persistence. If you go back to Psalm 130, I want to pick out another three phrases. This time they're connected by the word with. With you, there is forgiveness. With the Lord, there is steadfast love. With him is plentiful redemption. Forgiveness, steadfast love, redemption. All of that is also the language of persistence. But the key point is that that's not talking about our persistence. It's talking about God's persistence. And so when we say pray because of persistence, we're not saying, we're not talking about our persistence. We're not saying because of our persistence, we keep playing. The reason we can pray is not because we are persistent. The reason we can play is because God is so magnificently persistent. And the words we've highlighted in this Psalm capture this so beautifully. Forgiveness. That is all about persistence. He wants to restore our relationship with him. He wants to give you a way back. He wants to pull you out of the depths.

[19 : 19] Our sin is a massive problem and by a mile, the simplest and easiest solution for God is to walk away. But he doesn't. He does not walk away from you. And the reason he doesn't is because his commitment to you is so persistent.

Steadfast love, that is also all about persistence. In fact, this word, steadfast love, when you see that word, steadfast love in the Psalms and in other parts of scripture, it's all translating a magnificent and beautiful Hebrew word, the word Hezad. And I want to highlight that word because it's a word that's actually very hard to translate. So the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. Our Bibles are translations of the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. And that word Hezad is a really hard word to translate because it conveys more than what one English word can capture. It's speaking about love and kindness that operates to the deepest level. And so it's expressing the strongest level of commitment. It's a love that runs inwardly to the very core of your heart and extends outwardly to shape your actions and your conduct towards others. It's a love that is not responsive to goodness in other people, but one that's given out of generosity, love and kisses to his people. And so every promise that God makes is shaped by this concept of Hezad, this steadfast love, and that the heart of it is the fact that this is a love that never ever gives up. It's a love that's eternally persistent. And that's the level that

God's love operates at. God's love is not a changeable love. It's not a love that requires you to maintain a decent standard. It's not a love that's checking you every Sunday morning to see whether you've had a decent week or a bad week. It's not like that. It's so good that it's not like that. It's not a love that will last as long as you are lovable. It's a love that is relentlessly persistent. It is a steadfast love, an unshakable love, an undiminishable love.

And redemption, that's talking about persistence as well. Redemption speaks of buying back what belongs to you. And so it's marketplace language. It's a language of transaction, of ransom. In other words, it's a language of cost. And that's how God's persistence shows itself. He will not give up on you and he will carry the cost of getting you back. And he will do that because he's not giving up on you. And of course all of this is pointing us to Jesus. Week the magnitude of God's steadfast love. Because that's how far God will go to save his people. And in paying that price, God is providing plentiful redemption, bringing us out of slavery, bringing us back into his family. And it's all because of the fact that when it comes to your salvation, God is relentlessly persistent.

And if persistence means never giving up, then the cross is the greatest example of persistence that you will ever see. You see how far Jesus will go. You see how persistent Jesus will be. And it is all for you. It's all so that you can be his.

[23 : 19] And that's reminding us that yes, the gospel might motivate our persistence, but it never relies on it. The gospel never relies on our persistence. It forever and always relies on God's magnificent, beautiful persistence. And so yes, I want everyone here to grow in persistence in prayer. I want to be more persistent in prayer. And I want every one of us here to grow in our persistence in prayer. But at the same time, I want you to bask and rest in the beauty and wonder of God's persistence. About that. About how you are you are unforgettable, un-give-up-able in God's eyes. And I want you to rest in that and to rejoice in that and to understand more and more of just how persistent God is towards you. And you know, if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian, you receive all the benefits of God's persistence. And you see that in some of the big theological concepts that run through scripture. For everyone who is a Christian or who becomes a Christian, God the Father has adopted you into his family as his child forever.

That's persistence. The Holy Spirit has come to dwell in your hearts and he is never ever leaving. That's persistence. You are united to Jesus in an unbreakable bond. That is persistence. The Holy Spirit is sanctifying you day by day, making you more and more like Jesus, building you up to become the person that God wants you to be. That is persistence. Jesus has gone to prepare a place for you in heaven. That's persistence. God is holding you and he's never letting you go.

That's persistence. And he is the one who's doing it all. Because his persistence towards you is unending. And if anyone's here and you're maybe not yet sure about where you stand before the Lord or maybe you're like, well, I'm not.

I'm really not a believer today. Is it because God's not particularly bothered about you? Is it because God's given up on you? Or is it because he is persistently seeking you out and persistently drawing you to hear this message and this promise that he is giving? Is it because he is persistently waiting for you? And he is persistently saying, I am here. I'm calling you. I will help you take the next step. Of course, that's why you're here. Because God is not and will never ever give up on you. And so yes, we need to pray with persistence. But all of that is because of persistence. As we finish our series on prayer, I want us to come back to the question we've been starting with. How does prayer make you feel? Maybe you feel all of these things. If you do, you're like me and I'm always falling back onto that side. But I hope that this study has brought us a little bit more over to this side, recognizing the amazing privilege of prayer and that we can do so with peace and gladness, freedom, delight, satisfaction. And so if you're praying for the first time today, if you're praying again after not praying for a long time, or if you're continuing, please persist. They're teaching you about how we approach God. But most of all, they're teaching us about how God approaches us. Amen.

Let's pray together.