April 28/29, 2012

A Prayer from an Evil Man

5 Prayers That Rocked the World

2 Chronicles 33

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Two weeks ago I challenged us, together, to think about what is that thing that's most heavy on your heart, that thing that's keeping you awake at night. And would you be willing, through the course of this series on prayer, to pray like you believe that prayer moves the hand of God. Many of you have told me that, as a result of that weekend, your prayer life has been reignited with the belief that it *is* possible that prayer could move the hand of a sovereign God. I don't know if you are going to get a James story or a Peter story, but we have to believe there's power in prayer.

But I would guess that there are quite a few of you, since we first talked about it two weeks ago, where it has changed nothing. Why is that? Why is that...just not buying it? I would guess for quite a few of you there's a belief, if you are to be honest deep in your heart, that prayer may work for the really good Christians but—if you knew my story, if you knew my stuff, if you knew what I have done or what's been done to me—there's just no way *my* prayers are going to move the hand of a sovereign God.

Many of you will recognize the name Jeffrey Dahmer. Jeffrey Dahmer was a mass murderer in the late '80s, early '90s. I think he killed seventeen young men—at least he was convicted for killing seventeen young men. Not only did he sexually molest his victims but he actually cannibalized his victims. It's hard to even imagine the depth of human depravity to do such a thing. Jeffrey Dahmer was beaten to death by a fellow prisoner in 1994 but the news came out that, through the ministry of a local pastor into the prison, Jeffery Dahmer had found Jesus. The news came out that Jeffrey Dahmer had a religious experience and had come to believe that if he confessed his sins, that God would forgive his sins and would welcome him into heaven. It caused quite a scandal among people, talking about, "Is that possible that someone could commit that level of atrocities and then have a religious experience and everything's okay?" Even many Evangelical Christians argued whether that was possible. Oftentimes grace can be a very scandalous thing! If the story of Jeffrey Dahmer bothers you, you're going to be really bothered by our story today. It's the story of a king by the name of Manasseh, son of Hezekiah. He has two distinctions as a king. Number one, he was the longest reigning king in the history of the Hebrew people. Second, he was by far the most wicked, evil king in the history of the Hebrew people.

If you have a Bible, turn with me this morning to 2 Chronicles, Chapter 33. What do we learn about this king and what do we learn about this king as it relates to prayer? Just a little background regarding the structure of the Old Testament—many of you, very well intended, have decided, "I'm going to read the Bible cover to cover." We have what we refer to as the *Leviticus Club*. Basically that means that you get through Genesis and Genesis is good stuff. You get through Exodus and it's possible to make it through, but you get to Leviticus and you go in the tanker. (laughter) If you survive Leviticus, you're not going to survive Numbers and you say, "What's the deal with this book?" It's important to understand the Bible simply was not written to be read that way. This isn't a John Grisham novel. The storyline isn't going to make sense. The best way to think about it is that the storyline runs through what we refer to as the *primary* historical books and, if you picked those out and put them together, it's a wonderful story. But there's also what we would call the *secondary* historical books, which means they don't advance the story chronologically but they go

back into the story and fill it out with more details. So let's just take the periods of the kings. If you read 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, the storyline makes sense. Those are primary historical books. But as soon as you hit Chronicles, it's confusing because you say, "Now wait a minute here. We've already read these stories before and they even seem different." It's because Chronicles is a secondary historical book. It's not advancing the story chronologically; it's going back into the story you've already read and filling in details that the chronicler thought you needed to know. The result of that is the story of King Manasseh as told in both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. In 2 Kings we get a clear picture that this was a very wicked king. We find out he was the longest reigning king and we find out he was unimaginably evil. As a matter of fact, at one point in the King's description, it says that he was so violent, he was so bloodthirsty that he actually filled the streets of Jerusalem with blood from border to border. Finally Kings ends with his death—and this guy was so bad, he wasn't even buried among the kings. He was buried in his own plot in his own house. And then the story goes on. But when we come to 2 Chronicles 33, we learn there's a chapter to the story that's very relevant to our discussion this morning that isn't recorded at all in the Kings, but is very important in the Chronicles version. So we pick it up: Chapter 33, Verse 1:

> **Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. And he did evil in the sight of the LORD...** (*NASB, 2 Chronicles 33:1-2a)

Manasseh was the son of King Hezekiah. Last week Mark told you the story of King Hezekiah—a godly king who, in his moment of crisis, called out to God. My favorite part of that story is when God says to Hezekiah, "*Because you prayed*, this is what I'm going to do." We wrestle with the question, "Does prayer move the hand of a sovereign God?" but there is only one way to interpret what that text says. God doesn't say, "I was going to do that anyway—nice job of lining up with me." The statement is meant to be causal, "Because you prayed..."which means if you had not prayed, the story would have been different. There are many of these stories throughout the Old Testament. I don't understand how it works—it's clearly a mystery. But there's no question that God is saying: prayer does move the hand of a sovereign God. It matters. Manasseh would have been roughly eight years old when God wiped out one hundred eighty-five Assyrians and rescued the day—clearly old enough to hear the chatter at the dinner table, that God had done a miracle and had saved their lives. So what got into this guy that he would spend fifty-five years as a king, seeking new and fresh ways to see how deeply he could provoke and offend God? This guy was over the top. It says:

> **And he did evil in the sight of the LORD according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD dispossessed before the sons of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had broken down; he also erected altars for the Baals and made Asherim, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. He built altars in the house of the LORD of which the LORD had said, "My name shall be in Jerusalem forever." For he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD.** (Vs. 2-5)

Basically he did the polar opposite of his godly father. He did everything to resurrect pagan worship throughout the land. He rebuilt the temples—the pagan temples; he rebuilt the pagan altars; he established all these pagan ways. He even put the pagan altars in the courtyard of the temple, just to stick it to God. Verse 6:

> **He made his sons pass through the fire in the valley of Ben-hinnom; and he practiced witchcraft...**

Talk about put **his sons through the fire in the valley**! This valley was known as the valley of fire. It was filled with pagan altars and that's where you would take your child in order to offer your child as a human sacrifice and throw your child into the fire. Notice it's plural. He didn't do it one time. He took his *son(s)*. How do you do that? How do you have that level of depravity to take your own child and throw your child into the flame in the name of pagan gods? But that's what he did.

> **...he practiced witchcraft, used divination, practiced sorcery, and dealt with mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking Him to *anger*.** (Vs.6b)

I mean this guy is thumbing his nose at God; this guy's seeing how much he can do to make God angry. This isn't King David on a particular night having a moment of weakness and having an extramarital affair with Bathsheba, disastrous as that was. This is the king who was absolutely bent on turning an entire nation against God with every form of Satanist worship possible—to see how much he could do to provoke God.

> **Then he put the carved image of the idol which he had made in the house of God, of which God had said to David and to Solomon his son, "In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel, I will put My name forever; and I will not again remove the foot of Israel from the land which I have appointed for your fathers, if only they will observe to do all that I have commanded them according to all the law, the statutes, and the ordinances *given* through Moses." Thus Manasseh misled Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the sons of Israel.** (Vs. 7-9)

You have to understand: that is an absolutely breath-taking statement. Time doesn't allow us to go into all the details concerning how utterly wicked the pagan nations were, that God dispossessed out of the land. I mean these were really bad people. Most of us could not even conceive of the level of depravity that they practiced. This king filled the streets of Jerusalem with innocent blood from border to border. What the text is saying is: as bad as those pagan, idolatress Satanists religions were, King Manasseh surpassed them all in terms of his depth of evil. This is one bad dude.

> **Then the LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention."** (Vs. 10)

It doesn't say they didn't hear Him; they just didn't pay attention. They couldn't care less what God has to say. "We're sticking it to Him." So the next verse says...**Therefore.** We know what's coming don't we? But, before we go down that path, I just want to stop there for a minute because, at this part of these texts in the Old Testament, I always like to wrestle with the question, "Okay, we know what's coming; what would *you* like God to do?" In our culture we are so offended when God mediates out judgment, when God carries out justice, when God interferes. Often you hear people describe God of the Old Testament as a God of anger and a God of judgment and a God of wrath—and then suddenly He becomes a nice guy in the New Testament. That couldn't be more false. God is unbelievably patient throughout the Old Testament. If I was God, I would have whacked Manasseh long before this. It's hard to know exactly how much time passed, but probably in the neighborhood of fifty years of pure evil that God has tolerated in the land. But now we're going to get a **...therefore**...and it raises the question, "What would you like God to do?" We as a culture embrace this idea that we should *"Live and let live"*. "We shouldn't judge other people,"—which basically flows out of our

selfishness. We're narcissistic; we're indifferent. "I don't care what anybody else is doing as long as it doesn't hurt me." We redefine tolerance and turn it into indifference and then try to pretend it's a noble thing. It's not a noble thing. It's cowardice; it's indifference; it's narcissistic; it's selfish to the core. God isn't indifferent—He's a God of love. Therefore He's compelled to do something to stop this. There is never conflict between God's love and God's judgment. There's no conflict between God's love and God's wrath. It's precisely *because* He *is* a God of love that He must act. He can't just be indifferent and sit back and watch the carnage continue. So we get a **therefore**.

> **Therefore the LORD brought the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria against them, and they captured Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze *chains*, and took him to Babylon.** (Vs. 11)

So not many details: the Assyrians come in; they take Manasseh; they totally humiliate him; they put a ring in his nose like he's a wild bull. They put chains on him; they lead him off to a Babylonian prison. Verse 12:

> **When he was in distress...**
> [Okay, he's in a prison; he's backed into a corner, nowhere to turn—Mr. Big Shot.]
> **When he was in distress he entreated...** [That's a Hebrew word; he cried out to...]
> **...the LORD his God...**

I only get that far into the text and I'm already offended by that statement. What do you mean **the LORD his God**? Since when? This guy—for fifty years—has done everything in his power to provoke and anger God, set up every form of pagan idolatress worship possible. He threw his own children into the fire! So now he's stuck in jail; there is nowhere to turn. He's totally humiliated and now, suddenly, he has a religious experience and cries out to God. And I say, "Nice try fella; should have thought of that fifty years ago."

> **When he was distress, he entreated to the LORD** [he cried out to the Lord] **his God and he humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.** Verse 13:
> **When he prayed to Him, He** [God] **was moved...**

It's a Hebrew word filled with emotion. *God was moved with compassion; God was moved with mercy and grace.* And I find myself thinking, "You've got to be kidding me." I mean you're talking about hundreds of thousands of people massacred. This was a horrible man and now he gets stuck in prison, nowhere to turn, and he throws up a prayer to God! And you're telling me God's going to have compassion? God's going to have kindness? God's going to have grace and mercy on this guy? Imagine you're a family member of somebody who was slain. This all seems so wrong!

> **...He was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD *was* God.**

This verse uses a Hebrew technique where it doesn't give you any details. It's just: Boom, Boom, Boom, and Manasseh's back on the throne. The intent of the technique is to cause the reader great shock. This guy's finally in prison in Babylon. He throws up a prayer to God and the next thing you know God delivers him and he's back in Judah and he's back on the throne. And we as readers find ourselves saying, "You have got to be kidding me...you have got to be

kidding me! I am shocked at what I just read!" Scholars would say, by an overwhelming margin, the conversion of King Manasseh is the most radical conversion in the Old Testament. The only one in the New Testament that even comes close would be the conversion of the apostle Paul. I mean this is a big deal! There isn't a single person in this auditorium this morning that would even come close to the depth of evil that this man has perpetrated. You would have to be the king of a nation to do the level of evil he has done. Jeffrey Dahmer is a lightweight by comparison. God hears his prayer...and puts him back on the throne.

> **Now after he built the outer wall of the city of David on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, even to the entrance of the Fish Gate; and he encircled the Ophel *with* it and made it very high. Then he put army commanders in all the fortified cities of Judah. He also removed the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the LORD, as well as all the altars which he had built on the mountain of the house of the LORD and in Jerusalem, and he threw *them* outside the city. He set up the altar of the LORD and sacrificed peace offerings and thank offerings on it; and he ordered Judah to serve the LORD God of Israel. Nevertheless the people still sacrificed in the high places, *although* only to the LORD their God.** (Vs. 14-17)

What Manasseh did, when he returned to the throne, was absolutely everything in his power to reverse the damage he had done. He tried to clear all the idolatry; he tried to clear out all the pagan worship; he tried to clear out the altars out of the temple. He did everything in his power to try to make right what he had done so wrong.

> **Now the rest of the acts of Manasseh, even his prayer to his God and the words of the seers who spoke to him to the name of the LORD God of Israel, behold, they are among the records of the kings of Israel. .His prayer also and *how* God was entreated by him, and all his sin, his unfaithfulness, and the sites on which he built high places and erected the Asherim and the carved images, before he humbled himself, behold, they are written in the records of the Hozai. So Manasseh slept with his fathers, and they buried him in his own house. And Amon his son became king in his place.** (Vs.18-19)

It's interesting to notice in that last paragraph that the chronicler makes such an effort to tell us that Manasseh's prayer—he tells us twice—that, yes, his unfaithfulness, his sin, his evil, it's all in the records of the kings, but twice he tells us: so is his prayer. When he cried out to God—God answered him. It's a remarkable story of an evil, wicked king who, in his prayer, moved the hand of a sovereign God.

What caused God to respond? We have a hint of it in the text when he tells us that: when Manasseh prayed, he **...humbled himself greatly**. He was a broken man. His heart was characterized by repentance, which is evident by what happened when he went back on the throne. He did everything humanly possible to reverse the damage he had done. No question he was a radically changed man.

There is a huge difference between being sorry and repentance. Being sorry is about *emotion*—I feel it. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I got caught. I'm sorry about how it makes me look. I'm sorry for the consequences. I'm sorry about how it makes me feel—I'm sorry. It's very different from the brokenness of repentance.

Over the years I have found that sorry usually looks something like this. "I'm sorry, *but*…"

There's always a *"but"* to it. "I'm sorry, *but*…" Sorry makes excuses; sorry has rationalizations; sorry is about me. *I'm* the victim. Sorry is about trying to control things; sorry is about trying to manage how this is going to affect *my* reputation. "Sorry...but it's not my fault."

Repentance isn't like that at all. Repentance is brokenness; repentance is humility. Repentance, by the very definition of the word, means *to turn and go the other way*—180 degrees. Repentance has a sense of how offensive this is to God and it absolutely must stop! Sorry looks like this. "Sorry..."...more sin. "Sorry..."...more sin. "Sorry..."...more sin. Repentance isn't like that at all. Repentance understands how offensive this is to God and, in your heart, there is a commitment that this is wrong. This is evil in the sight of God—and it must stop and it must stop now! Repentance isn't about *me*. It isn't about me being the victim. It doesn't have any *"buts"*. It doesn't have any excuses; it doesn't have any rationalizations. It doesn't try to control the environment; it doesn't try and manage how this is going to affect my reputation. It's just brokenness; it's just humility; it's just open, broken hearts before God.

Do I believe that a *sorry heart* moves the hand of a sovereign God? I sincerely doubt it. But do I believe that a *broken, repentant, humble heart* is heard by God and God responds with compassion and with grace and with mercy? Absolutely yes!

I don't know what you've done. I don't know what your story is. I don't know what's been done to you. But if, this morning, you have convinced yourself there is no way God would listen to my prayer—"I mean He might listen to the prayer of the really nice Christians, but He's never going to listen to the prayer of a loser like me" —you have totally misunderstood this God. Just because you hold a grudge, just because you can't forgive, just because you can't get over it, doesn't mean God is that way. Thankfully God is not like you—and He is not like me. This God is unbelievable in His compassion and His grace and His mercy. He just wants to see a heart that's broken and repentant before Him.

You say, "You mean if I pray and ask God with a broken heart that everything will be okay?" No, I never said that. There are always consequences to sin. They don't just go away. They didn't go away for Manasseh. He tried. In the last couple of years of his reign he tried—but he could not turn the nation back. When he died, his son Amon took over and Amon was a *chip off the old block*. As a matter of fact, the text even says that *Amon was evil just like his father was*. Amon had learned from his father how to be evil to the core and took the nation back down that path. As a matter of fact, about two years into it, the servants of the king figured out, "We know where this is going. It's going the same place that his father took us," and they assassinated him to stop it. And the next king came on the throne.

There are always consequences to sin. But when you come before God with a broken, humble, repentant heart, I guarantee you God listens and responds with unimaginable compassion and grace and mercy. No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, nobody in this room comes close to King Manasseh. So you must believe, by faith, that if I come in brokenness before this God and I cry out to Him, I have every reason to believe that it's just possible that my prayer may move the hand of almighty God.

Our Father we are thankful this morning that You are a God who loves us. Lord, I know those words are easy to say but what we're saying is that You are the God that knows everything about us and still You love us. Lord, there is no one in this world that knows everything about me except You and there's no one who loves me more. But that's even hard to comprehend. God, I know that this room, this morning, has many people who feel like, because of what they've done, because of the ugliness, because of the evil, perhaps because of what's been done to them, that there's just no way You'd listen. Lord, give us the courage to believe that with a broken, repentant, contrite heart, You will respond with unimaginable compassion and grace and mercy. Lord, help us to believe that. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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