



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 5 Prayers That Rocked the World

By Pastor Bryan Clark

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What is that thing that's most heavy on your heart, that thing that's keeping you awake at night? 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 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, 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, Jeffrey 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 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. 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 is 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, 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, 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 thousand 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...

It's talking 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 sons. 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 was involved with witchcraft, and 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, idolatrous, Satanists religions were, King Manasseh surpassed them all in terms of his depths 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 idolatrous 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.”

Arnie: Bryan, I totally agree with your last statement. Finally, Manasseh gets what he deserves and now he calls on God. It's so tempting to say, “You've made your bed, now sleep in it. You don't deserve any kind of grace.” Then I remember, I didn't deserve it either.

Bryan: I think we all struggle with that. I mean, think of this language. I deserve more grace. So typically, when life doesn't go well and we think it's unfair, we probably wouldn't put words to it, but that is what we're thinking. I deserve more grace, which is nonsensical. Grace is undeserved, but I think the longer that we're Christians, the more likely it is to forget how amazing grace is. We start to presume upon it and actually think we deserve more of it. When at the end of the day, we're not that different than Manasseh, really.

Cara: This, when I heard that, I thought of one time I was with someone and I was telling them how somebody just got a terminal diagnosis and how they found Christ. I was so excited, but their response was, "Well, of course they found Christ, now they're dying," you know. But I thought, that's not grace though. The deathbed confession is allowable; it's fair.

Bryan: Yeah. [Yeah.] It's what's amazing. It is scandalous. [Yeah, it is.] But, and it's amazing. [Yes.]

Cara: So, if there would be this exclusive club then for these evil dudes, Manasseh would not only have been a member, but probably the CEO. So, I realize that this gets us into tomorrow's message. But what was it about Manasseh's prayer that did get God's attention?

Bryan: I don't think it had anything to do with the exact words. I think it had to do with his heart and only God can ultimately see somebody's heart. But I think he was, at that point, truly a broken man. He wasn't just sorry he was broken. And in that moment, God heard his prayer.

Cara: When you think about it, if it weren't for God's punishment, Manasseh wouldn't have called on God. So, God had his eye on Manasseh for a long time.

Bryan: So, there's lots of questions with that and how many people suffered the consequences of the evil deeds he did. But it is a reminder: God is so unbelievably patient and even in His discipline, it's full of compassion.

Arnie: So, it really wasn't just Manasseh that God was concerned about. Verse 14 says that both Manasseh and his people paid no attention to God.

Bryan: Right? So, follow the leader has this sense of stopping this momentum of destruction, which reminds me a lot of what's said before God sends the flood. If you remember, we talked about this in Genesis. All the momentum is evil and God in his compassion steps in and stops it. And that's kind of how this text feels as well.

Arnie: So how should we be praying for our leaders?

Bryan: Clearly the Bible says we should. So, we pray for wisdom, we pray for courage, but I would suggest mostly what we need to be praying for is a brokenness before God, or nothing's really going to change. And I hesitate to say that, because what are the circumstances that are going to lead to the brokenness of our leaders? And that's typically not good news, [No, it's not.] that we all will probably be part of that story.

Cara: Right. You mentioned Jeffrey Dahmer, who, I mean the guy committed many horrible things in his life, but he came to know Christ in prison. And actually, I had watched a documentary about that, and Jeffrey Dahmer actually asked the question, can Heaven be for me too? And I remember hearing he was saved, and I wept. My husband's like, why are you crying?

And I was like, because Jeffrey Dahmer is saved. He came to know the Lord. There are a lot of prisoners who've come to know Christ and some of them are probably listening right now. And even though they're behind bars, they're probably actually living in greater freedom than most of the people outside of prison.

Bryan: Yeah, interestingly enough, I think that's exactly true. So, I was with a group of prisoners in our own Nebraska penitentiary just a few months ago that were part of the prison fellowship program. And I actually said those exact words to them. I'd rather be a prisoner in the penitentiary and know Jesus, than to be outside the walls and live in bondage. To me, to be in bondage and not know it is the worst prison of all.