

## **Sermon 2-28-10 Lent II**

### **Elton Smith**

Good morning! If you're a visitor here this morning or missed last Sunday, I should first mention that half of the congregation is downstairs taking part in a Lenten five-week series learning more about prayer. For us up herein the church I will be preaching on the appointed bible readings, especially as they relate to developing and enhancing our prayer life. Then, at the time of the offertory, we all come together here to receive communion.

I'm wondering how many in this congregation this morning came originally from another denomination--?

If you came out of a different church culture it may have surprised you when you first visited here, how quiet the church is when you when you come in. Granted, this may be because for some reason people are sometimes late here –when they never would think of doing that for work or school! But there's a more important reason, and I'm thankful for it.

Hopefully the first few minutes before the service begins can be a time to settle down, re-group, re-focus in a short prayer and get set for this period of prayer and praise to be a time that can change your life.

Does that sound extravagant? It's not if you're coming here with the kind of mind-set that I visualize about you when I begin early in the week preparing my part in the worship for next Sunday. It helps me to think of you as

coming with expectancy and anticipation, ready to listen and reflect on what the words and music say to you, and sensing that your experience is shared with those around you.

This time on Sunday morning can be one of those very special opportunities you have for reflection time to gain a perspective about your life—to put things in proportion and on balance, for the big things, the important things, to be validated and more visible, and the little things to be sorted out and acknowledged just for what they are—little things. That, my friends, help take you in prayer to the biggest goal in life, by asking “What is God’s purpose for my life, what goal is worth giving my life for it?”

I guess I want every Sunday to be that special for you. Maybe that’s a preacher’s “audacity of hope.” Audacious or not, the “drama of God’s action” is precisely what the Bible’s principal theme is for us, especially those sections that are selected for our reading on Sundays. And here’s a tip—read the text of the bible readings before the service starts. That will give you a chance to really understand what the preacher is talking about!

Our sermon theme for the five weeks of Lent is “y our prayer life.” Prayer connects you to the heart of God and his purposes for us this morning in the lessons for this second Sunday of Lent. In the Old Testament Abram, now Abraham puts his faith in God and is accepted through a prayerful covenant into a right relationship with the Lord. In the second reading Paul warns of enemies of the cross of Christ and urges his disciples in Philippi to stand firm in the hope of the glory to come.

In our Gospel Jesus is disdainful of King Herod's threats and expresses his determination to fulfill his prophetic destiny in Jerusalem. The intentions for all of these readings are gathered up for us in prayer as the psalmist expresses great trust and confidence in the Lord and asks always to be connected with those prayers to the heart of God.

Last week we talked about what prayer is not. Prayer is not black magic and prayer is not a celestial ATM machine. When I'm late rushing to the store to get a prescription I couldn't just pray for the store to be open for me and expect it to happen. It's true that God knows the innermost prayer of your heart but when the football team gets down on their knees and looks up in the sky when there's ten seconds left for a field-goal victory, they must know that you can't manipulate God.

Jesus knew something about manipulation. When he's warned that Herod is after him he reacts very quickly: when he says "Go and tell that fox for me..." we sense Jesus' anger and disgust with "that fox"—sly and cunning Herod, who would attempt to manipulate and control Jesus with threats.

At the same time, there is a tenderness in Jesus' love for his people and his anguish at their unwillingness—YET—to be gathered together into the mother-love of God. Listen again to the phrase he uses: "as a hen gathers her brood under her wing, and you were not willing!" If the image you have in mind of Jesus—who in this life is the

most focused understanding of God you will ever know-- if the image you have in your mind is somewhat blurred and gauzy, here is a snapshot of the real Jesus and the powerful energy of God.

For there to be a true relationship to God in our prayers there needs to be that energy and power, strong enough to move us forward. Some of that can come in your prayer and worship life if you begin any prayer by establishing the ground rules with “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” and its reminder that prayer is a two-way street, **our** heartfelt need and **God’s** action—the initiative of God’s loving-kindness and our faithful response of life-renewing acceptance.

That’s where I start from in prayer—but that’s not enough to keep me praying. I am also aware that much in my prayer life is the same way I am with many things. I get impatient if things aren’t happening fast enough and my mind wanders. So my attention is sharper and more focused as I make the first verse of Psalm 27 we read today, a personal statement of affirmation that “the Lord is my light and my salvation.” In my prayers, as in all of my life, I need clarity and direction, and I’m greatly strengthened by knowing that it is not said merely that the Lord gives light, but that he **is** light, nor that He gives salvation but that he **is** salvation.

Affirming those truths right up front can open the windows of your mind and heart so that you can discover light on the circumstances of your life—and do it as a welcoming and strengthening presence, casting out the doubts and uncertainties that so often can cloud our thinking. Seeing

God in the warm sunlight of our prayers and worship, you can have confidence and clarity as you face the inevitable shadowy confusions in your life that you know all true well.

As I write this I am aware that first of all I'm preaching to myself, because I need to be reminded of these truths about our relationship with God, if my prayers are really going to have integrity. Laying hold of God's great willingness in prayer is not easy for many of us—especially for those of us with impatient wandering minds.

Yes, I am aware that much in my prayer life is the way I am with many things. I get impatient if things aren't happening fast enough and my mind wanders. That's why Psalm 27 is such a help. We go there for light as we set the foundation stage of our hearts and our minds in prayer so that we will be ready when the psalm concludes with the simple but profound advice: **wait!**

That is a word we never like to hear. But contained within the word "wait" we have a clue what waiting does. The origin of the word is to twist, stretch. The tension that occurs during the time of waiting produces the strength when the time of testing comes. You and I likewise are made strong by God's grace when he puts us under pressure.

That's the hope and promise in this series of sermons on prayer this Lent. Next Sunday we will learn more about waiting as Jesus tells us more with the parable

of the fig tree. Then the following Sunday our understanding is illuminated to discern the quality of our prayers as he tells us the parable of the forgiving father and the prodigal son.

And finally on the Sunday before Palm Sunday we are inspired to hear Paul's words to the churches and ready to discover what it means when he says, "This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." Life will always be complicated for us, but if we can capture that kind of vision in our prayers this Lent, we will be ready for the journey on the rest of the way to Palm Sunday and Easter!