

Jesus at Center Service
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Wasilla Bible Church
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I'm a pastor/teacher, which means I teach in a congregational setting. Week by week one of my primary responsibilities and callings is to take you, as a people, through passages of scripture and relate 'em to your life as we go through all the ups and downs, twists and turns, of being God's people in our time and our place. Sometimes, however, I kinda put the teacher element aside and I focus on purely what I would call pastoral. And that's what I'm gonna do today.

This is primarily between me and our people, our congregation. If you're a visitor here today I encourage you, I welcome you; glad you could be with us and hope you benefit from our time together. But the focus of what I'm gonna say in the next few minutes is towards our congregation, the people who call this their congregational home. And I wanna speak to you pastorally as we start a new year. And I wanna press you, as a pastor, to prayer—to prayer that is deliberate, that is persistent, and that is very, very specific. As we go into this coming year I want you, and I'm going to encourage you, and I'm going to press you as a pastor to continually, deliberately, persistently pray this prayer...the prayer you see every week as we close our service.

It's a prayer of witness. It's patterned, it's built, it's designed after...it was written to reflect the prayer, the first prayer we have recorded of the early church at congregational prayer. In the book of Acts, chapter 4, there is a time when the congregation prays, and we actually have that prayer recorded. It isn't just that 'they prayed.' We have the prayer recorded. And this prayer is a reflection of that prayer. It's a prayer of witness, that in every circumstance...and the church at that time was in a very difficult circumstance...and our prayer is that in any circumstance we're in we will have a confidence to speak of Jesus, to speak His name and to tell His story. Now, we're not talking about an arrogance. We're not talking about a boldness that just blasts through. We're talking... simply the word here is the idea of an openness, a willingness to speak His name and to tell His story whenever the Spirit leads. When the Spirit gives the opportunity for you to speak of Jesus and to tell His story, our prayer is that God will be with you at that moment and you will have the openness to do so.

There's another element to that prayer in Acts chapter 4, and this prayer reflects that also, is that we recognize that it has to be more than just talk when we give witness to the reality and the wonder and the glory of Jesus. And this prayer reflects it just as the early church did. We pray that God will extend His hand in our lives. And the way He works in us, and the way He works through us will confirm our witness to the reality and the glory and the wonder of Jesus.

That's our prayer. There's a story behind it and its place in our congregation. Some time ago, a little over a year ago in fact, we hit a point where we had finished two major projects in our congregation, things that had been long-term goals, that had been a target for a number of years. We had finally reached those things. One was a three-year project, one was a goal that had gone back seven to ten years even, and we had finally reached two major milestones. They were accomplished together at the same time. And our question was what are we gonna do next? And we wrestled with that last year. Most of a year ago I was wrestling with 'Lord, where are You takin' us next? What's the next thing for us to do?' And I was expecting...I was looking for some vision, some project, you know, target that we could aim for that was measurable and we could outline, and I could put in front of you and say 'This is what's gonna be', and we could get excited about it and everything else, and I could organize, and we could put people into teams, and we could assign duties, and we could go after this and we could put it on a schedule and sequence, and we would know who was doing what when, and we could go after this! And all God would give us was a prayer. And I remember going into my office and saying, "Lord, is that it?" And I'd go with the Elders, and we spent months as Elders discussing this. "Is this what He's callin' us to do? Is this it?" And the answer came back, "Yes."

It's like God said to us, 'Simply pray.' But what's gonna happen? 'Just pray.' What do we need to set up for programs? 'Just pray.' It's like God said, 'You know, I value where we've been, I value what we've done, I value how you've served, but listen...what I want you to do is just pray and watch what I do.'

And so I went to Joel and I said, "Write us a prayer", and he wrote this song. He designed it so we could sing it acapella, and that I could actually start it and sing it through. People have asked me, "Larry, is your voice improved? No, this song was just written so I could sing it. Really. And we started in with a commitment to pray this prayer over a thousand days.

We're now on day 273, week 39, of 142 weeks in this prayer. And I am absolutely convinced this is God's leading for our congregation...number one, because I believe it's consistent with His call upon us as a congregation. God's call upon the church is that we be salt, we be light, we be witness. The church is not called to be a relief agency. The church is not called to be a political action committee. The church is not called to be an educational institution of theology. The church is not called to be a counseling center. The church is not called to be relief agency. Now, all those things are things we get involved in. But the church is not called to be any of those things. What we are called to be at our time, at our place in history, is to be people who give witness to the reality, the mystery, and the glory of Jesus Christ in any and every circumstance. *That is our calling*, and this prayer is consistent with that.

I believe this prayer is also consistent with God's stirring within us. And I won't track this, but it's interesting...I see it more in retrospect than in actually forethought, and that is that if I go back and track where the LORD has taken us I see a distinctive pattern that He began three years ago the Sunday we walked into this building...actually, almost four years now. And I've begun to recognize there's a very deliberate progression He's taking us through thematically, year by year. Whether you recognize it or not is not my focus. I just...as a pastor I can see it. And I believe we're in the fourth year of a five-year sequence God is taking us through. I'm convinced of that. It's consistent with His calling upon us, it's consistent with His stirring within us, and I believe it's confirmed by His working among us.

Thanksgiving Sunday, in the evening we have a Thanksgiving service and it was our usual one. We had pies set up and there was a worship time, and people are sitting around the tables and sharing what God was doing in their lives over the past year. It was designed to be kinda like table fellowship, where we could just talk about God's work in our lives. And we had a reporter come in...from Italy! Ok? Now, we had a lot of that over a year ago, and I thought, 'Man! This one is way behind!' Ok? But actually, Sarah Palin had just started her book tour, and this lady was from Italy, and she writes for the biggest magazine in Italy. It's kinda like their Time Magazine. And she was doin' background in the area, and she wanted to go to this church, so she came to our church. And I met her in the evening as she came in, and I said, "Listen, this isn't a normal church service. We're gonna eat pie. We're gonna sit around the table and talk about God. And, I mean, that's all we're gonna do. This is not a normal worship service." She says, 'That's fine, that's ok.' She wanted to be here. And she had her notebook, and so you're kinda conscious, I wanna be careful what I say and all that sort of stuff. Finally I took her, and I brought her over...I didn't know what else to do, I put her with Phyllis, my administrative assistant. I said, "Phyllis, take care of her." And Phyllis says, "Ok, Larry."

Well, they ended up sitting at the table, and through the evening this woman just heard that table—ordinary people like you and I—talk about God's work in their lives. At one point in the evening she looked over at Phyllis 'cause she's surprised, being from Italy, seeing so many children in the church. And that night we had a lot of kids 'cause they're in there eating pie. Downstairs, today, but that night they were up here eatin' pie. And she asked Phyllis...she looked at Phyllis and said, "Do you have any children?" Phyllis said, "No. Never have." And the lady was quiet, and they went on with the sharing time, the talking and eating pie. And eventually she talked to Phyllis again, towards later in the evening, and she said, "Does that bother you?" She said, "I always wanted children and haven't been able to have them. It bothers me. Does it bother you?" And Phyllis was able to spend the next few minutes just talking to her and explaining to her that, "You know, God has met that need in my life with Jesus. And I have a special relationship with Jesus, and He satisfies me...even without having a family with children. In fact, it's gotten where most of these kids around here feel like my kids." And Phyllis was able to just share with this lady about the reality of Jesus in her life.

Later, after the service when they were leaving, Phyllis felt a burden to talk to this lady one more time. She just pulled her aside, and she goes to her and she says, "Listen, I can tell it really bothers you, you don't have children." She says, "I'm gonna pray for you." And they just sat there and hugged. And Phyllis goes, "I may never see you again, but I'm gonna pray for you."

Listen, if God brings a lady all the way from Italy to put her here on a Sunday night sitting next to someone else who has felt the sorrow she feels, so that person can give witness to the reality, and the mystery, and the glory of Jesus, I believe God is taking our prayer serious.

Joel's brother brought a girlfriend, a serious girlfriend, up for a family reunion. All but one of Joel's brothers were here, and they were having...his parents were here and they were having this kinda holiday reunion over Thanksgiving. And this young lady, just a terrific young lady, not a Christian...she'd been raised in Russia and raised in an atheistic home, and really didn't have much of a clue about Christianity at all. And Joel's desire was that, 'Boy, if she's here I'd really like us to be a witness to her.' And it just...it worked out. Things just happened. And like Wednesday night before Thanksgiving, they're around...the family's gathered around and friends have come over and they start playing music, which is what they do at Joel's place if you ever wondered. They get out guitars and they start singing, you know...go figure. And he says, "We start talking about the songs and why we wrote 'em, and we began..." he said it was just this rich night, late into the night, of all of his family and friends sitting around "...talking about God's presence in our life." And the next morning he talked to this young lady and she goes, "You know, I woke up and your song was on my mind."

Interesting thing is Joel's dad, who is addicted to books...and Joel and I agree with that and we've told his dad that, but I am not one to talk, so anyway... His dad found...every time he comes to town he goes to used book stores, and he found a used study Bible. It was fantastic! It was beautiful, almost new condition, and it had the study notes and everything else. He thought this would be just perfect for this girl. It would introduce her to the Bible, it gave a reading plan, it would explain things, it would be understandable, and she could learn so much about Jesus through this, and she's really interested. But he says, "I don't know how to give it to her! I mean, culturally and stuff, if I give her a used book is that like re-gifting? You know? And I don't know for sure that she really wants it." So Joel's dad came up with this awesome idea. He said, "Let's have a family raffle at Thanksgiving dinner, and Joel, let's rig it! And she'll pull out that name. It'll be her name." Joel says, "Let's not rig it."

They had a family raffle. Put numbers in a hat and they all drew the numbers out, identified which number was theirs, put it back in the hat, and there's seven or eight people there. And they pull the names, and she pulls out the Bible.

See, if God is gonna make sure that little Malachi pulls that name out of the hat for witness, I'm convinced He's with us in this prayer.

One of our men, Willie, shared on a Sunday morning how he'd heard this song week after week ending the service. And he kind of woke up one day, talking to...or actually, one evening, talking with Joel, and realized "This isn't just a song. It's a prayer! And I should be prayin' it!" And so he took it as a personal commitment that he would start praying this sincerely as a prayer, not just as a song to mumble through at the end of a service. Ok? And so Willie began to do that, and he told us the Sunday before Thanksgiving how things began to develop in his life after he began to pray that way. Well, there was a man in the service that day that heard that testimony and he felt convicted, too. He said, "You know, that's all I've been doin'. I mean, I realize," he told me later, he says, "Larry, I know when you and Joel introduced it and explained it that you must have said a lot about it. But," he says, "I didn't pick up on it. It's kind of a male thing, you know, I guess. You just kinda don't pick up on things real easy." And he says, "That day it got to me," and he says, "I wanna sincerely pray that prayer."

So the next day he got in his car, he headed to work, and he very deliberately, very sincerely, said "Lord, every circumstance, give me the confidence to speak Your word as the Spirit leads." And he prayed this prayer. He said it was amazing...he walked in at work and within ten hours...ten minutes he was in his office, and within ten minutes two other people come by and he says he doesn't often see these individuals. They work in another area. But the came by, they're in his office, and they start chatting. They're talkin' about football and everything else. And then he says they bring up the subject of church, and he says "I began to talk about church, and before we're done I'm inviting them to church!" And one of 'em says, "I'm already goin' to church." The other guy says, "You know, I think ...you know, I'm interested in that." And when they left he sat back and thought, "Whoa, that was cool! That was good. Wow, I didn't expect it that fast."

Next day he comes, with the prayer prayed, and there's a woman workin' in his office. He knew she was gonna be there. There's a project that needed to be done. And he walked in, and as he walks in she's on a cell phone and she has in front of her...and she's obviously reading a text or reading an email, and she is cussing and swearing, just going off! And he says, "Oh, that must be an upsetting text." And she says, "Yeah, it's somebody who just keeps talking to me about God!" He said, "I kinda sat back and said, 'Lord, way to put me behind on this one.'" And so he goes, "Well, why's that?"

They began to have a conversation. Because of the way...they were waiting on a computer process...that they had a good amount of time there. And so they were able to engage in a conversation as they waited for the computer to complete its task. And he said, "You know, it got a little emotional. Not in a bad way...in a good way," such that

she looked at him and says, "You really take this serious, don't you?" He goes, "Yes." And eventually she left. A short time later he had to go to her office. And he walked in, and they exchanged a greeting and talked a bit, and then she says, "By the way, I'm gonna file a grievance against you for talkin' about God and pushing religion." He goes, "Whoa." He said the thought came to him that there were worse reasons for being fired. So he started to talk to her about God again.

He says, "Larry, I'm not a person that's ever led somebody to Jesus. I don't walk 'em through the four spiritual laws." He says, "I don't know what to say. I just...all I can do is plant seeds. All I can do is explain God's important to me."

By the time they're done, nothing dramatic. She just simply says, "Listen, I'm not gonna push any grievance here. I just...I guess I need more people in my life talkin' to me about God."

Listen, if God will put one of us at risk in our job after we pray this prayer, I'm convinced He's serious about it. God is not playing games with this. This isn't about 'How do I get in touch with my spiritual side?' This isn't 'How do I enjoy a better way of life?' This is about how you respond to what God is doing and calling us to do.

And so, as pastor, I'm gonna press you. I'm gonna press you to pray this prayer, 'cause I am so convinced God is in it. I'm gonna press you to pray it weekly when we put it up there at the end of the service, not as a closing song but as your prayer for the week. I'm gonna encourage you to pray it every day, and not just for yourself, not just for your own circumstances, not just for what you're going through. Pray it for your fellow believers in this congregation. Pray it for people who are in all sorts of circumstances around you, that in those circumstances God will give 'em the confidence to give witness to the reality, the glory, the wonder, and the mystery of Jesus. Pray for each other.

I'm gonna press us to pray, and I'm gonna press us to pray with a certain amount of pastoral firmness. This isn't purely instructional. I'm being very directional at this moment. If you're not picking up on this prayer and its importance, and starting to engage in it, then I'm concerned that you are either careless, negligent, or resistant to God's leading in our midst. It's been almost 40 weeks. And yeah, I know, some of us are males...it takes us forever to sort it out. But if by now you're not picking up that this is really important, and that God's in it for us, then I will challenge you; I will challenge you directly. You are either being careless, negligent, or resistant to God's leading in our midst, and I will call you to repentance. God is not playing a game with this.

At the same time I'll encourage you with a pastoral promise. One of my favorite verses in scripture...it's found in John 16:24. I put it up here on the overhead, and it's right near...in fact, it's the night Christ was to be arrested. The next day He's gonna be crucified. And He's with His disciples, and He's gonna leave them, and He's preparing them for His departure, what it's gonna be like when He's not with them. And He makes a promise to them, and it's an amazing promise! It goes like this. He says, 'Listen, until now you've never asked anything in My name. In other words, you haven't asked representing Me. You haven't approached God and presented prayer as a representative, as a servant, as a follower of Me.' He says, 'You haven't done that. I haven't sent you to the Father to represent Me, to ask in My interest, to pursue My priorities.' He says, 'Up to now you haven't done that.' And He goes on and He says, 'But ask now and you will receive. Go and represent My concerns. Go and represent My interests. Go and represent Me,' Jesus says. 'Use My name! Ask and you will receive when you ask in My name.' And then He adds this... "*...that your joy may be made full.*"

The individual who shared his office experience with me explained. He says, "You know, Larry, this prayer's a little scary." He says, "You kind of find yourself a little bit hesitant." He says, "I kinda realized right now that God is there right now, ready to answer it any time I ask. It's just a matter of asking." And so there's a certain hesitancy about 'Is that really the path I wanna go?' And the answer is yes, 'cause I'm convinced in following our God in prayer at this level, following the priorities and concerns and the desires of Jesus, as representatives of Him on earth, when we pray like this we walk a path that leads to a joy beyond anything we've ever experienced. It's scary and intimidating...you name it, it is all those emotions. But at the same time it leads to a place of joy. So I'm gonna press you to it. Take Jesus at His word. Pray in His name, for His concerns, and know the joy He has for you in that.

Pastoral firmness, a pastoral promise. The best thing I can do, though, is simply call us to Communion, to remember Jesus and to remember Him in such a way that He is the One we wanna talk about. He is the One we wanna speak of. He is the One we wanna give witness to. And that's what Communion is about. And so in just a moment...in fact right now, I'm gonna ask the servers to come and take their places, and I'll explain what happens next. But we'll take Communion together and bring Jesus to the forefront of our thinking, as the One who is not

only to be center in our worship—He is to be center in our witness, in our lives day by day, when we're scattered out there in all our circumstances.

In just a moment I'll read a passage of scripture. If you've never been in one of these services, I'll read a passage of scripture and after that I'll lead us in a word of prayer, and then the musicians will play. And there'll be music in the background. And as they do so you're invited, if you desire to express your faith by taking Communion, to come forward. As you come forward you'll be met by elders and pastors and their wives. And as you come up you'll be served the bread, and you'll be served a cup. And as you're served they'll simply say, "Drink this in remembrance of Jesus, and eat this in remembrance of Him." Very simple statement. And you can eat that and drink that right here at the table and then return. If you wanna take the elements back to your table and be quiet and reflective there for a while you may also do that. But we encourage you, come on. If you wanna bring your whole family together at once and take Communion at the table together you're welcome to do that, or individually. There is no hurry. Takes a while, we have the music playing, and you can just kinda work your way forward. If you're backed up in a bit of a line just look for an empty table, and you go around and find one. It's a very simple process, a very easy process. At the center of it is what Communion is about, and that is remembering Jesus the way He wanted to be remembered, the One who died for us, whose blood was given, shed for us, whose body was broken for us.

The Apostle Paul explains Communion this way. It's a passage of scripture we always read at this time. It's found in 1 Corinthians 11. Paul says

For I received from the LORD that which I also delivered to you, that the LORD Jesus in the night in which 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 He took the cup also after supper, saying,

"This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the LORD's death until He comes.

Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven,

We come before You in obedience to Jesus, doing what He asked us to do, and that is to remember Him. We pray, Father, that as we take these elements, the bread and the cup, and remember Him as the One who died for us, You would renew us in His reality, the reality of all that He is, and in so doing, Father, You would bring Him to the center of our worship, and You would also bring Him, Father, to the center of our witness in this world.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.