

A Year-end Reflection on Prayer

MJCF December 27, 2020

Philippians 4:6-7

Today's message will be more of a short reflection than a sermon, since I'd like to have time for everyone to share later. What was 2020 like for you? What was the best thing about last year, or the best thing that happened? What was the worst thing that happened?

If I think about the past year, I can remember many challenges and tensions. Mr. Sakashita and Mr. Tada have had serious health issues. We continue to remember them in our prayers. Recently, it was a shock to hear that Yamaguchi Kikuko san passed away because of the pandemic. We pray that God will surround the family with love and peace at this time. Of course, the pandemic is probably the biggest thing that has affected all of us. Added to this have been things like tensions over the US election. I confess that I've spent too much time getting wrapped up with the various issues and tensions this past year. How about you?

On the other hand, there have been a number of good things that have happened. Because of the pandemic we hurried and were able to get a church website up and running. We also learned how to have Zoom services. It's been sad that some have not been able to participate for various reasons, but because of our online worship, God has blessed our fellowship with people who are able to participate from anywhere in the world! It has been great to have people like Mary participating from Abbotsford, Ken participating from Calgary, Greta participating from Ontario, and Kanamaru san, Koike san, and Yoko san participating all the way from Japan! What a blessing we've experienced as a church!

Looking back on 2020, how did you grow over the past year? Did you grow in relationship with God? My goal was to grow in prayer, both personally, and as a church. How has that gone? I know I have often struggled in my prayer life. My prayers have not always been answered as I'd hoped, and I then wondered what God's plan was. I've also struggled with distractions. It's easy for my thoughts to wander as I try to focus just on praising God in prayer. But, I feel like I grew, maybe just a bit over this past year.

Through the area Mennonite church I've had the privilege of being able to receive regular professional counselling. I feel like I've learned things during these sessions that have changed my life. It has been amazing. One thing I learned was that as we try to focus on God in prayer, we don't need to be discouraged that we keep getting distracted with other thoughts. The point is not for us finally to be free of distractions. The point is that every time we are distracted, we have an opportunity to return to Christ. It's like weight training. We have a chance to exercise our "returning to God" muscles. As we pray, we can experience God's peace.

Today, we read Philippians 4, verses 6 and 7. It's an encouragement to not let our worries control us. Instead we are to pray, and bring everything to God. Notice that we are to include thanksgiving as well as our requests. The promise is that we will be able to experience the peace of God which goes beyond human understanding. That's a deep peace that doesn't change with our circumstances.

I'd like to read a page from a book written by Oswald Chambers in the book, "Prayer, a Holy Occupation." He says:

Prayer alters [people] on the inside, alters [their minds] and [their] attitude to things. The point of praying is not that we get things from God, but that we learn by prayer to detect the difference between God's order and God's permissive will. God's order is – no pain, no sickness, no devil, no war, no sin; His permissive will is all these things. What [people need] to do is to get hold of God's order in the kingdom on the inside, and then [they] will begin to see how to handle the riddle of the universe on the outside.

He asks:

What might happen if I spent more time allowing God to change me and less time trying to change my circumstances? God has so constituted things that prayer on the basis of redemption alters the way [people look] at things.

This reminds me that as we grow in relationship with God through prayer, we will grow in confidence that even though things around us may be often out of control. God is still in control behind the scenes. Our prayers do make a difference in the lives of the people for whom we pray, but prayer also gives us a place to stand when things seem out of control on the outside. When Jesus died on the cross, it seemed like all was lost. But, after the resurrection happened we see that God was still in control. God took that terrible situation and changed the result to good. We are now forgiven our sin through Christ's sacrifice. As we prepare for a new year, let's continue to give our "returning to God" muscles a workout, and come to God more often, in prayer. I invite you to join me in prayer now.

O Lord, it's been a challenging year. But, even through the challenges we see the work of your hands. Thank-you for your blessings, and for ways that you've encouraged us through other people. Draw us nearer, we pray. Grant your deepest peace to those who have been struggling for various reasons. Teach us to pray with heart, soul, and mind. May we trust in you, through Christ our Lord, Amen.