

Menlo Park Presbyterian Church
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Series: Prayer: Does It Matter?
2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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“God's Moonbeams”

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What an incredible way for affirming God's care for our nation and what a wonderful day God has given us to celebrate our independence. And for me, what a unique way to start my experience here at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, Open Door Church, because I have been in the military, moving from place to place. My family has experienced what it's like living as a tumbleweed. We have moved throughout the nations, through America several different times. I think we've had about...I think it's 18 moves, perhaps.

So it's great to finally be here. It's great to finally have a family with whom we can grow roots. When I think of all of our military out there today, out there on the frontiers of what was Fallujah...and Ramadi is now Kandahar...and all the different places in the world where our nation is defending the very privilege that we get to experience today, how important for us to remember that there are many, many people connected to a great God. I just want to say it's wonderful to be with you.

This is the 234th anniversary of our nation's independence and I'm reminded that we do live in a nation promising us the liberty to freely worship God. And one symbol of our liberty is *a bell*. It was cast in London, of all places, sent to the Pennsylvania State House in 1752. Little did anyone expect this 12-foot-circumference bell with its 44-pound clapper to crack. It didn't make a great sound. Yet the words that are cast around the crown of that bell ring ever true today. Those words are from Leviticus. ***"Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."***

Another symbol of our liberty...*our flag*. It's flown from the highest mast of every Navy ship. Being in the Navy, I can say it's wonderful to see that flag flying. That's from the top of that ship where we begin our message today.

It's been just over 30 years ago when I knew a navigator aboard a Navy-guided missile frigate. Now in the Navy a frigate is often referred to as a *small boy*, meaning it's smaller than all of the other Navy ships, or at least most of them. It's still large to most of us...400 feet long, 3,000 tons of gray-painted steel. It's a collection of radars and SONARs and boilers and weapons, but most importantly, it has a crew of 250 sailors. This ship would steam over the entire Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean.

When you think about it, the job as navigator is unique. There's not a single roadmap for the navigator to follow. There are no signs pointing to the correct on-ramp or off-ramp. There are no landmarks to look for, just blue water everywhere you look on the horizon.

Well 30 years ago, the key to navigation on the open sea was using the stars. It's called *celestial navigation*. Finding one's position by using the stars is called *shooting a celestial fix*. Now picture yourself at sea for a moment.

There are four things needed to shoot a celestial fix. You need what's called a *sextant*. A *sextant* is the capital letter *A*. It's a nautical instrument. It looks like the capital letter *A* sitting on the base of a rocking horse. Then you need a very accurate *timepiece*. You need a *horizon*. You need to see that horizontal line where the sky and the sea meet. And you need *stars*. You need at least three stars. A cloud-free sunrise is the ideal time because you have both stars and a horizon.

Well this particular frigate got underway on a short voyage. It was a five-day transit from Singapore to the Philippines. It was across the South China Sea, and on the very first day, there was a severe storm...heavy seas, 30-foot waves, thunderstorms and lightning and rain and a 60-knot wind, a complete canopy of clouds, no horizon, no stars. The navigator couldn't shoot a celestial fix to find the position of the ship. He prayed to God for deliverance, specifically a clear sky with no clouds at sunrise. Regrettably, his prayer wasn't answered.

The second day the storm continued to grow worse and the puffy umbrella of dark, marshmallow clouds expanded into infinity. The navigator no longer knew the ship's exact position and through the hammering rain of the monsoon, sailors spotted the silhouette of a large merchant ship and suddenly the radio crackled. "Navy ship, please give us your position. We are lost. Over."

Imagine the Merchant Master's embarrassment of needing to call another ship. Imagine the frigate Captain's greater embarrassment at not being able to give a positive reply. "We were hoping you'd know. Over." We were both lost.

That second night the storm grew worse. Psalm 107 speaks of sailors who get caught in the storm at sea. *"They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end."*

Throughout the second night, the storm grew worse. The Captain and the crew of the frigate were at their wits' end. The Captain was frantic. The navigator was lost which is a terribly awkward position for the navigator. He knew Mekong Delta and Vietnam were somewhere off the port side and Spratley Islands and shoal water were somewhere off the starboard side. Wasn't sure how far away they were and that's not a good thing. The navigator continued to pray for deliverance...clear sky with no clouds at sunrise.

On the third day in the wee hours of the mid-watch...between midnight and 4:00 in the morning...the navigator was trying to get some rest. But while the crew was fast asleep, he couldn't sleep because he was scared and he was stressed out and he was completely overwhelmed by the circumstances.

At 2:00 a.m. a sailor wakes the navigator, shakes him up. "There's a clearing of clouds ahead, dead ahead, in the dark early-morning sky." Navigator puts on his shoes and quickly hurries to the bridge. Just as the sailor said, there's a temporary skylight opening. In the open clouds, there's this dome. And through that hole, the full moon is shining. The entire sky is filled with bright moonbeams. It's like a stage light. Moonbeams radiating down. Moonbeams shining and bouncing off the waves of the stormy sea.

For the first time since leaving Singapore, that navigator can see the horizon. He also looks through that dome in the sky and he finds three stars, and it is as bright outside as any clear morning just before sunrise. Never before did that navigator know anybody to shoot a celestial fix by the light of a full moon in the middle of a storm in the middle of the night to obtain a position. But that navigator was desperate.

He grabbed the sextant. He grabbed the wristwatch. He found three stars. He shot a celestial fix. He

located the ship's position, changed course, proceeded safely to port. The Captain said, "Nothing short of a miracle."

Two lessons learned. First, God did answer the navigator's prayer, but differently than expected. The lost navigator prayed for a clear sky with no clouds at sunrise because every good navigator knows that's the time to shoot a celestial fix. But God instead taught him to *expect the unexpected*. He expected a clear sunrise; God gave him moonbeams instead.

The second thing the navigator learned. When deliverance comes to him on that third day, when God breaks open that three-day-old canopy of clouds, flooding the sky with the brightness of the rising moon, the navigator found himself in such a desperate situation that he accepted God's gift of moonbeams without hesitation, ultimately providing safe passage for this ship and its crew of 250 sailors. God taught him to *accept the unexpected*.

Our message today as we walk in our walk of faith, and especially as we pray...we need to *expect the unexpected* and then *accept the unexpected*.

Let's look at what Paul writes to the church in Corinth. Second Corinthians, chapter 12. ***"I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven...And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say."***

This "man in Christ" Paul was referring is Paul himself. Fourteen years before the time he wrote this letter to Corinth, sometime between his conversion and his first missionary journey...probably around AD 42 or AD 43...Paul experiences this extraterrestrial realm. There's a mystical experience. He's caught up to the third heaven.

In Hebrew thought, the first heaven is where birds are flying. The second heaven is where that navigator finds the sun and the moon and the stars. But the third heaven...the third heaven is where God dwells. An incredible journey.

But Paul also received from this experience one disagreeable consequence...a thorn in the flesh, a struggle with a personal weakness. Let's look at verse 7. ***"To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me."***

What was Paul's thorn in the flesh? It's uncertain. He never says. Most scholars believe it was a chronic physical problem and evidence in Scripture points to the probability that Paul suffered from some kind of eye disease. We see it in Galatians 4, verses 13-15. ***"As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn...I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me."***

Later on in the letter of Galatians, Paul writes, ***"See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own***

hand!" We do know in Acts 9:8 that Paul was temporarily blinded during his conversion. It says, ***"Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing."***

Whatever it was, Paul continually prayed to the Lord about his thorn in the flesh which tormented him and he also gave God some pretty specific instructions and directions on how to deal with the pain. ***"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me."*** Three times Paul ***"pleaded with the Lord to take it away."*** It took Paul three seasons of prayer. It took Paul three times of praying and pleading. I would have given up on the first time or maybe the second.

But God is faithful and God answered Paul's prayer. What if Paul had stopped after praying the first time? What if he'd given up after the second? He never would have appreciated or understood or accepted God's design and God's plan. That should encourage us not to give up as we pray.

Verse 8. ***"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me."*** Three times Paul ***"pleaded with the Lord to take it away,"*** and God answered his prayer...not by removing the ailment, not by deliverance from the ailment, but by the necessary grace to endure the ailment. God wanted Paul to retain that pain in order for Paul to know without doubt that God's ***"grace is sufficient"*** because God's ***"power is made perfect in weakness."*** Gene Peterson in *The Message* writes it this way. God told Paul, ***"My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness."***

Paul certainly didn't expect that answer from God. Paul was pretty insistent that God deliver him from the pain. He, like the good navigator, was looking for a sunrise and he didn't expect God's moonbeams to shine forth in his pale and painful ailment. Yet Paul did *accept the unexpected* and Paul accepted God's answer to his prayer. Paul's thorn in the flesh becomes a blessing and not a curse. Paul's acceptance enables him to say that he ***"boast[s] all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me... For when I am weak, then I am strong."***

You see, by giving Paul this, his self-sufficiency got a knockout blow. Paul was kept from pride. God pricked any possible bubble of arrogance Paul had. Maybe Paul's emerging humility we see from this is background to why we see Paul referring to himself in the third person in the passage we read when he says, ***"I know a man in Christ."*** Paul learned to rely on God instead of his own treasure house of talent, of energy, of effort. It released Paul. He was given freedom to let life happen.

Paul learned that with the wound came Christ's power. Paul discovered that his strength came from his wound and he understood how God was at work. He must have been so glad. He must have been so relieved that he had kept on praying. What if he'd stopped? Paul quit focusing on the handicap and began focusing on the gift and it was a case of Christ's strength moving into Paul's weakness.

How often do we find ourselves leading by our words or leading by our works, but failing to lead by our wounds? It's from our wounds that Christ shines most brightly. It's from our wounds that you and I are most authentic. Paul is an example for all of us. He's someone who grasped the truth of finding God's strength through personal weakness and his thorn proved to be a help and not a handicap. Paul discovered that Jesus is Lord of the thorn. Jesus can take a thorn and use it for His kingdom. Jesus can take a thorn and use it for His glory.

For just a moment think about the image of *thorn in the flesh*. What sensation do you associate with that image? When you find yourself in pain, talk to God. Ask what you want. Look for how God is at work. Look for where God is at work and if you can't come up with an answer, ask a friend, "Where do you

think God might be at work in my life?" Often a friend can tell. There's such a value to community and friendship.

Why are two Christians who are connected together with Christ stronger than they are individually, by themselves? Because they are bound together with Jesus and that truth is found in Ecclesiastes 4:12 where it says, **"A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."** Or to quote a famous Swedish proverb, probably John wrote this..."A shared joy is a double joy and a shared sorrow is half sorrow."

Paul's thorn proved to be a help and not a handicap and later on in Paul's life, his acceptance of God's unexpected answer to his prayer enables him, as he finds himself weak and hopelessly bound in chains in this murky, damp, stench-filled prison cell, to discover the real strength of character. Because of the sufficiency of the Lord's grace, power is made perfect in weakness.

When you think about it, the Bible is stuffed with examples of *expecting the unexpected* and then *accepting the unexpected*. There is a boy whose brothers sell him into slavery and he ends up in Pharaoh's court. There is a shepherd boy who becomes king. There's a farmer who turns out to be a prophet. There's a stowaway who ends up being in the belly of a fish. And then there's that rough-edged fisherman who disgraces himself. He denies his Lord and he's elevated by Jesus to become a bold disciple.

All of those folks never expected anything other than who they were, but God had better ideas, and He has better ideas for us. Ephesians 3:20 tells us of a God **"who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us."**

There's Someone else in the Bible who shows us our need to *expect the unexpected* and then to *accept the unexpected* from God and that Person, like the navigator on the frigate, is awake very early in the morning, unable to sleep while those around him are unable to stay awake. This Person, too, is praying. He finds Himself in painful circumstances. One of His closest colleagues is betraying Him. The band of brothers who pledged themselves to Him is soon to abandon Him, and as dawn approached, He'd find Himself rejected by His Father.

Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane...Jesus is well aware of *expecting the unexpected* from His Father, that the very Son of God must be put to death by hanging from nails on a cross. Jesus realized that humanity owes a debt to God for our sin that we simply can't pay. No matter how hard we try, we just can't pay it. Jesus, who knew no sin and therefore owed no debt, was acutely aware that He was about to pay a debt for us that He did not owe.

His prayer here is one of strength, to *accept the unexpected* from His Father. He prays, **"Abba, Father... everything is possible for You. Take this cup from Me. Yet not what I will, but what You will."** Jesus, the King of heaven, is about to be mocked and just hours after His prayer, they put a crown on His head. Does anybody remember what that crown was made of? Thorns. Jesus knows all about thorns. Jesus is Lord of the thorn. He's a thorn-crowned King, and He makes a little thorn into a thing of glory and He can do that for you. He can do that for me.

An acceptance...when Jesus accepted His impending death on the Cross by allowing His palms and His heels to be nailed to a tree, it gave Him assurance and certainty that this was indeed the Father's plan, that Jesus, who was perfect, was the only acceptable sacrifice to restore us, who are imperfect, to a redeemed and perfect relationship with God.

So Jesus suffered death on the Cross and three days later rose from the grave, and just as it was for the navigator, deliverance came on that third day. There just could be no resurrection without a crucifixion. There could be no redemption in our lives without His perfect sacrifice, but by defeating death, Jesus was proclaimed King of the third day. *Expect the unexpected. Accept the unexpected.*

I fear that too often when we pray, we don't *expect the unexpected*. We expect the sunrise to burst forth on our horizons. We ignore those radiating moonbeams that are really there shining through our stormy, open sky. Sometimes it seems that unless we're struggling in our own desperate storm, we'll completely overlook those moonbeams. We're not desperate enough. Or when the moonbeams come, we overlook them. We just don't accept them. "I'm going to wait until this sunrise."

But Jesus is saying there's a different way to pray. He prays, ***"Abba, Father...everything is possible for You. Take this cup from Me. Yet not what I will, but what You will."***

How do we grow sensitive to God's moonbeams shining through our stormy, cloudy, foggy, starless, confusing situations? How do we prepare ourselves to *accept God's unexpected answer*? We can learn from the King of the third day. We can learn from Him how to open ourselves to the mystery and the power of God. He who has recreated mankind through the life and the death and the resurrection of His own Son is He who gives us the ability through His Holy Spirit to be sensitive to seeing His moonbeams, His unexpected answers.

When you pray, pray knowing that God indeed answers prayer and anticipate God's prayer in a unique and creative way. Our God is the God of Creation and He creates for our lives new possibilities, new dreams, new ideas, and our God assures us there isn't anything that will happen to you or to me that somehow doesn't hold God's design within it.

Romans 8:28 is a very trustworthy phrase. ***"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose."*** God never wastes a hurt. The fact that God's power is displayed in our weaknesses and our wounds...that should give us courage. It should give us hope. It gives us freedom to hope in the midst of despair, when things look impossible. It gives us freshness to know that even though this is the end of a chapter, it's not the end of the story. Our weaknesses and our wounds not only help us in our character, they deepen our worship because in admitting our limitations, we become authentic. We end up glorifying God by affirming His strength.

What storms do you find yourself in this morning? What thorn do you bear? Where is your pain? Name your thorn to God. Name your storm to God and remember this secret in prayer, that as you tell God how big your storm is, don't forget to tell your storm how big your God is. Your God is bigger than the storm. Your God is stronger than the thorn. Your God is the One who delivers you to freshness and freedom in Him.

Some of us are hurting. Some of us are wounded. A relationship has gone sour. We're angry. We're unable to forgive. We don't really know how to be healed. Some of us are suffering from a recent failure. Some of us are like Paul. We're suffering from our own health problems, or we're burdened by the health problems of those we love. Some of us are sharing vocational disappointments or financial pressure.

Could God be working in you right now, in a deep and better way? He's the God of the moonbeam. He's the Lord of the thorn. He's the King of the third day. Can you say after me, "My God is the God of the moonbeam. My God is the Lord of the thorn"? Ah, praise be to You, Lord. Indeed You are.

Let your prayer flow to Him today. Look for the future with expectation and anticipation, yet *anticipate the unexpected* and *greet the unexpected with acceptance*. I propose that as you pray, look for God's moonbeams to shine through. His moonbeams are there. They're reaching out for us. Welcome His moonbeams and follow Him.

Throughout that entire stormy voyage from Singapore to the Philippines, there never, ever was a clear sky with no clouds at sunrise for that navigator. Yet that navigator found God's grace sufficient in the South China Sea. He was so moved by that experience that he surrendered his search for the stars of heaven to pursue the search of the God of heaven and he exchanged his sextant for a Bible and he stands before you now (I was that navigator) honored and humbled by God that my voyage in the Navy led me to this destination. I didn't expect this. I don't deserve this, but I accept it. And I praise God for this gift, this gift from the God who created the heavens, who finds joy in my joy, and I celebrate with Him.

When you pray *expect the unexpected*. When you pray *accept the unexpected*. Let God's moonbeams point you into His direction by bringing you out of the storm you find yourself in and begin sailing smoothly into His sheltered harbor.

Let us pray: Lord God, may we be sensitive to Your Holy Spirit, that we may respond to Your unexpected answers to our prayers. We praise You for blessing us with Your presence, Your gift of Your Son, Your gift of grace, Your gift of love, Your gift of liberty that we recognize on this special day. We thank You for finding joy in our joy and we ask for Your blessing and power to equip and empower us that we may follow the path of Jesus Christ. ***"To Him be glory forever and ever!"*** And all God's children said, "Amen."