

2 KINGS 19:14-19 SO THAT ALL MAY KNOW

When you dig a hole so you can put a post or a pole in the hole, how deep do you need to dig the hole?

That's not a riddle. It's just how the world works. If you want to put a long post or pole in that hole, you have to dig a deep hole. A shallow hole will anchor only a short pole. But a deep hole will anchor a pole that reaches high.

I offer that image, to help us begin to ponder prayer. When we pray, we come to God with our requests. It's that simple. But might this simple action, seem to be, or really be, rather shallow?

Let's say you are a believer in Jesus this morning. Don't you ever wonder, "Why am I bothering God about this?"

Let's say you come today as an unbeliever or a doubter about Jesus. You may wonder, "Even if there is a God, and even if he does hear prayer, why do we bother him with anything?"

These are good questions. Almost everyone prays, but we wonder about the point of it all: does God care about, what I am praying about?

This morning, we ponder the prayer of Hezekiah. It's not so well known as the prayer of Jabez, but it speaks volumes to us about prayer. This prayer is not about how much we pray, but about how we pray. This prayer guides us to a habit of prayer that digs deeper, and reaches higher, because here we see what God does care about, and how we can shape our prayer, to fit his heart.

We start to see how this works as we notice what WE PRAY ABOUT.

How do we tend to pray? What do we tend to pray about?

We pray about THE THINGS AROUND US. For example...

* Events in the news. The war in Iraq. Presidential politics. Religious persecution. Tragic events. We see our world, and we are moved to pray about our world.

* Situations in the community. That horrible murder in Cambridge City last month. The recent closing of a major manufacturer in Connersville. The friend of a friend, whose trials and troubles are known to many in a small town.

* Troubles for loved ones. Illness. Financial problems. Tragedy. Family breakdown. Death.

We pray about the things around us, and we pray about THE THINGS BEFORE US. We don't just pray about what others face. We pray about what we face. For example...

* Sickness. "Lord, please restore me to health. Please take away this illness that is making my life so miserable."

* Children. "Lord, please keep them from making the mistakes I made. Lord, keep them from harm. Lord, make them successful."

* Wisdom. "Lord, I don't know what to do here. I have two options: bad and worse. Whatever way I turn, I face trouble. Help me."

A few years ago, someone did a survey of what people most often pray about. The top subjects for prayer: "Good or better health...strength to overcome a personal weakness...world peace...financial or career success."

What does all this have in common? In every case, we are praying for "the thing." The situation. The crisis. The person. Near or far. Big or small. We focus on the thing.

Is this wrong? In and of itself, no. It is right to pray for events in the news, and situations in the community, and troubles for loved ones. We should pray for healing, and for our children, and for wisdom, and many other things.

But if our prayers are only about the thing, something is missing. It does seem a bit shallow, doesn't it? The things around us will pass.

It may even seem a bit selfish, won't it? The things before us are about us, and doesn't God want us

thinking about someone other than ourselves?

So let's meet Hezekiah. He is the king of Judah. At this point in Old Testament history, the kingdom of Israel has split into a northern kingdom called Israel, and a southern kingdom called Judah.

The Bible describes Hezekiah as one who "did right in the eyes of the Lord...Hezekiah trusted in the Lord...And the Lord was with him."

Hezekiah needs the Lord to be with him, because trouble is brewing. In the past few years, the king of Assyria has defeated the northern kingdom. The people of the north have been hauled into exile.

Now the Assyrian army commander is on the doorstep, at the gates of Jerusalem, and as we would say it, he is talking trash. We can sum up the message this way: "Surrender, or I'll rip you to pieces."

The prophet Isaiah reassures Hezekiah, but then the king of Assyria, a charming fellow named Sennacherib, sends more messengers. Their message: "We are coming to get you. No one has stopped us, and you won't, either."

This is hard stuff. As we have seen in our reading of the Old Testament, God has promised to bless all the nations through the sons of Abraham. Right now, it's not looking too good for the sons of Abraham.

So Hezekiah prays. HE PRAYS ABOUT...

Well, he prays about the thing. He prays for deliverance. But how much deeper is his prayer, even as he prays about the thing!

As we read his words, we see that he does not just pray about the thing. He prays about the kingdom. He prays about God's kingdom.

Hezekiah prays about THE KINGDOM AROUND HIM.

As you listen again to some phrases from his prayer, notice how he prays with a focus on how the actions of the Assyrians, relate to God as the ruler of heaven and earth.

* "You alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth." Lord, you are the One, true, living God.

* "Listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God." Lord, he is mocking your power and your authority.

What is happening here? Hezekiah sees the thing, but he sees the thing through the lens of the glory of God, and the building of his kingdom. In this view, the universe is all about God's purposes, and all about God's honor. Yes, he prays for the thing. But he also prays for the kingdom.

We see this even more when we see that Hezekiah prays not just about the kingdom around him, but THE KINGDOM BEFORE HIM.

Verse 19: "Now, O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God."

The thing is before him, and he prays about the thing. But he prays for the thing, with a purpose. He prays that in this thing before him, or through this thing before him, all kingdoms may know that the Lord is God.

Do you see how he is praying? He could just pray, "Lord, just get us out of this. Just give me this deliverance. I need this. I really need this. You have to give me this. I gotta have it. I...I...I.

But Hezekiah is digging deeper. He is praying not just for the thing. He is praying for the kingdom. He is praying for the deeper honor of God's name, among the nations, even as he prays for God to save him and Judah from the Assyrians.

Let me sum it up this way: Hezekiah's prayer reflects a deep desire for the honor of God his Creator, and God his Redeemer.

Maybe our prayers seem so shallow, and even so meaningless, because they are so small. As Christians, we know God values us, because...

* He is our Creator. He made us.

* He is our Redeemer. He is remaking us, through Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, then rose from the dead, to bring us forgiveness and new life.

Yet while we know we are valuable, we also know we are not everything. If I am honest, I know I am not the center of the universe, so there does seem to be something rather silly about praying only for what is around me, and only for what is before me.

It's like standing in a phone booth (if you can find one anymore!), and shouting. You may be loud, but you are just a little person in a little box. Your shout just doesn't seem that important in the big scheme of things.

But as we dwell upon the prayer of Hezekiah, we catch a vision for prayer that is so much bigger, and so much deeper.

In the Lord's Prayer, we say, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We are praying for God's kingdom to be known and seen and experienced by all nations. We are praying for people to follow the ways of the Lord here, as his creatures do in heaven.

That is the prayer of Hezekiah, and my heart is that this would begin to be the shape of our prayers, as people, and as a church.

So what does "kingdom praying" sound like?

* Let's say you are praying for the latest tragedy, splashed all over your high definition TV or computer screen.

Yes, you pray for relief. Yes, you pray for comfort.

But a kingdom prayer is deeper. A kingdom prayer says, "Lord, you know this has happened, and you are good enough and great enough to bring kingdom growth, even through this.

"Would you send Christians into this mess, so they can show the love of Jesus? And as they show this love, will you make it so that new people know this love?"

You are digging deeper, and your prayer is rising higher.

* Let's say you are praying for the health of a man in our congregation, who is struggling with a chronic health issue.

Yes, it is good to pray for healing. Yes, it is right to pray for God to provide help and comfort through the fight.

But a kingdom prayer is deeper. A kingdom prayer says, "Only you know what is next. But no matter what happens, please help this brother to show the character of Jesus through this. May you bring him into contact with all kinds of people who do not know you, and may his faith in you touch them, and may they someday turn to you in faith."

You are digging deeper, and your prayer is rising higher.

* Let's say you are praying for your children, as they navigate the many obstacles and opportunities of the teen years.

Your temptation is to simply pray for survival - for you, and for them!

But a kingdom prayer is deeper. A kingdom prayer says, "Father, I will not simply pray for my daughter's life to be easy. But I will pray that even when she struggles, she will know your help. Even when she is not loved, may she show the love of Jesus to her classmates. May you make her strong for you today, as your Holy Spirit teaches her, changes her, and prepares her to serve you every day of her life."

* Let's say you are praying for a loved one, who is addicted to a chemical, or bottoming out emotionally, or wasting his life on foolishness.

Yes, you pray for freedom from addiction, or for emotional maturity, or for wiser choices.

But a kingdom prayer goes deeper. A kingdom prayer says, "Father, do what only you can do. Reveal, root out, and reform that person's heart, so that he may no longer be ensared by evil, but would live for you. Take this broken person, and make him into someone who will help other broken people. May you redeem his life, so others may be redeemed, for your kingdom."

* Let's say you are praying for this church. How do you pray for this church? How do the elders pray for this church?

Yes, we pray for the needs. We pray for the sick. We pray for the hurting. We pray for the mourning.

But a kingdom prayer goes deeper. A kingdom prayer says, "Father, may we thrive in faithfully serving your kingdom here, and as we assist others who are doing it around the world. May you change hearts and lives here through our ministry. Help us welcome each person with the love of Jesus Christ. Do your kingdom work, through us, as you see fit. Your kingdom come!"

Your kingdom come...in the life of that person. Your kingdom come...in our worship. Your kingdom come...as our deacons help needy people. Your kingdom come...in Vacation Bible School. Your kingdom come...as we listen to the tales of the broken-hearted. Your kingdom come...as we scatter through this area in all of our daily callings.

Kingdom prayer. This is not just an "add-on" to our prayers. This is a passionate, God-centered desire for God's kingdom to come, seeping through every prayer. It is a prayer that says, "Before anything else, and through everything else, we desire the coming of God's kingdom."

How might God answer this prayer? How might God answer, as we pray not just for the thing, but for the kingdom?

Do you know the rest of the story of Hezekiah and the Assyrians?

That night, after Hezekiah prayed, an angel of the Lord went to the Assyrian camp, and put to death 185,000 of the men. Then as the great ruler Sennacherib worshipped his false gods, his sons took his life.

We may not expect or desire God to respond exactly that way! But what will God do, through the prayers of people whose hearts are not given just to praying for the thing, but who will devote themselves to praying for God's kingdom? What might he do in us, as individuals, if we pray this way?

I don't know. God is God. We are not. This is about him, not us. He answers prayer, as he sees fit.

But might we try to build this habit, and find out what he might do? He calls us to pray, and he responds to our prayers. How might he respond?

I hope to soon present to you, a simple plan for us to begin gathering in small groups, to pray specifically and especially for the kingdom.

But don't wait for me. Now...today...as individuals and as a congregation, let us commit ourselves to digging deeper. Let us strive, by the Spirit of God who works within us, to begin praying for his kingdom, in all of our prayers. In the quiet of the early morning...in the hospital room...in the hurried walk down the hall to the meeting...in the car...in front of the news...let's dig deeper.

A Scottish pastor tells of three ministers gathering in the 1950s to pray for God's kingdom in Scotland. They prayed fervently for four years. When they were finished, they were disappointed. Nothing seemed to change.

Then this pastor tells of going to a meeting of some 2-hundred Scottish ministers in the 1980s. As the conference began, one of the leaders asked for a show of hands.

He asked, how many of you came to faith in Jesus during a certain four-year period in the 1950s? Some raised their hands.

Then he asked, how many of you were born during a certain four-year period in the 1950s? Almost everyone else raised their hands.

Nothing had changed? And it's not just ministers. It's missionaries. It's young people, living for Christ in schools and universities. It's workers, serving others in the name of Jesus in their workplaces. It's all of us, showing Jesus wherever we are, sowing the seeds of the kingdom.

Dig deeper. Rise higher. Pray for it. Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name, be the glory.