

Prayer: Review

What is prayer?

- Prayer is the life-breath of faith. Like breathing, it flows out of spiritual life – and sustains it.
 - Prayer is pouring out our hearts to God (Ps. 62.8), and the means to conform our will to his.
 - Prayer is one of the means by which God activates his eternal plan (Ps. 139.16, Jas. 5.17-18).

Why is prayer so challenging?

- Shame – Prayer exposes our selfishness and spiritual powerlessness.
 - Legalism – We think we need to clean ourselves up *before* we can begin to pray.
 - Perfectionism – We get too focused on “doing it right” with our prayers.
 - Impatience – We want to get things from God (“Amazon.God”) vs. getting to know God.

What gospel promises help us face these challenges?

- The Holy Spirit helps us to pray (Rom. 8.26-27).
 - Jesus doesn't want perfect prayers, but honest prayers (Mt. 11.28).
 - Honest prayer includes honesty about our struggles to pray (Ps. 94.19).

How does corporate/public prayer differ from personal/private prayer?

- Public prayer is more formal and precise, respects Christian liberty, and is made in the plural.
 - For these reasons, some churches wisely limit public prayer to those with appropriate training.

When should we pray?

- Biblical examples of regular times for prayer (Gen. 24.63; Ps. 92.1-2; Dan. 6.10; Mk. 1.35).
 - Biblical commands to practice continual prayer (1 Th. 5.16-18, Eph. 6.18, Rom. 12.12).
 - This does not mean diverting our attention from the daily grind of regular life (Neh. 2.1-5).
 - Continual prayer is an ongoing conversation with God amidst the events and rhythms of life!

What kind of prayers should we employ?

- Four categories of prayer:
 - Adoration/Praise - celebrating God for who he is, what he's done, & what he promises.
 - Confession - admitting to God our fears, limitations, and sins.
 - Thanksgiving - acknowledging to God that he's the source of all gifts & good things.
 - Supplication/Petition - expressing our desires to God.
 - Four pathways into our reality:
 - Creature - adoration/praise reminds us that we are not God (Ps. 103.14)
 - Sinner - confession reminds us of our limits and flaws (Ps. 130.3-4)
 - Receiver - thanksgiving reminds us we are not self-made (Ps. 90.3, 104.29)
 - Believer - supplication/petition helps us to live by faith (Ps. 119.154)
 - If we neglect any one of these categories, our view of God and/or ourselves will be distorted!

What can we do to make sure our prayer life actually contributes to our relationship with God?

- Relationships require listening; prayer should flow out of meditation on God's self-revelation.
 - Biblical meditation means filling our minds and hearts with the truths God reveals in his word.
 - Three keys to practicing biblical meditation:
 - Ask good questions: God? Man? Christ? Christian?
 - Use implications: contrast, foreshadowing, fulfillment, etc.
 - Turn Bible truths into prayers: praise, confession, thanksgiving, petition

How does the Lord's Prayer help teach us to pray?

- It can be prayed verbatim; it can also be used as a framework for building our own prayers.
 - Its structure is: 1) gospel preface, 2) three God-centered petitions (wonders, kingdom, plan),
3) three petitions for our needs (life/society, guilt/grace, protection/rescue).

The Last Elephant in the Room: “Unanswered Prayer”

The Experience of “Unanswered Prayer”

- The first thing to note is that we are not the first people to wrestle with it:
 - *Job's questions* (Job 38-41). Despite Job's faithfulness and deep sufferings, God does not say, “Please understand...” Rather, God in many ways says to Job, “Remember who I am.”
 - *Moses' plea* (Deut. 3.23-27). Moses was told he would not enter Canaan (Num. 20.10-13). He pleaded with God to reconsider. God refused and told him to stop asking.
 - *Paul's thorn* (2 Cor. 12.7-9). Struck with an affliction so difficult he referred to it as “a messenger of Satan,” Paul pleaded three times with the Lord to remove it. The Lord refused.
- Processing these struggles properly is critical to our spiritual health:
 - False *teaching* exists that would pin the blame for “unanswered prayer” on lack of faith.
 - False *assumptions* lurk in our hearts that can inhibit the growth God intends for us.

The Assumption behind “Unanswered Prayer”

- When we pray for something and don't receive it, we may assume prayer “didn't work.”
- Note: This is not primarily a *philosophical*, but rather an *existential* struggle. Many “unanswered prayers” involve serious struggles, strong emotions, and deep pain.
- Yet is it ever true that God does not answer prayer? Or does he give us an answer we don't like?
- If we interpret “No” to mean prayer “doesn't work,” what are we implying about God? About us?

Some Reasons for “Unanswered Prayer”

- *Sometimes we ask for things with selfish motives.* “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” (Jas. 4.3)
- *Sometimes we want something which may seem good to us, but which our all-knowing Father knows would actually be bad for us.* “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Mat. 7.7-11)
- *Sometimes God wants to teach us something that we can only learn through suffering.* “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” (2 Cor. 12.8-9)
- *Sometimes God has deep purposes that we cannot guess – or would not believe if he told us.* “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways...” (Isa. 55.9)

The Gospel Includes “Unanswered Prayer”

- The Bible promises that even the most painful “No” from God always includes a better “Yes” (Rom. 8.28). Jesus proved this promise himself in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mat. 26.39). Did Jesus lack faith? Was his request unworthy? Why then did the Father say “No”?
- Even when we cannot guess *why*, we can remember *who* it is that tells us “No”: the God who can turn the most horrible suffering into an unimaginably good future. He's done it once already.

Processing Our “Unanswered Prayers”

- The gospel transforms “unanswered prayers.” No longer are they simply occasions of suffering; they become *opportunities*. If our good Father says “No,” we may of course ask, “*Why?*” But we should also ask, “*What* are you trying to teach me? *What* do you see in this that I don't see?” Remembering the cross, we can even smile in our tears, “*What* are you planning that's better?”
- “Everything is needful that he sends; nothing can be needful that he withholds.” (John Newton)
- “The life you now have is the life you would pray for if you had God's wisdom.” (Rev. Dick Ellis)