

Growth Questions

“Can you think of ways in which your prayers were answered differently than you had asked? Did it work out for your good? Might it be too early to tell?”

“Have you thought through the implications of what it would mean for God to give you everything for which you asked?”

“How has what you believe to be true of God encouraged you to pray? In what ways has what you believe to be true of God caused you to stop praying?”

“How would your prayers be altered if you knew how ‘high and wide and deep the love of God is for you’? What if in discovering God’s glory you find your own?”

“Why is trusting Father God often more of a last resort than a first instinct? What more does God have to prove before you will be convinced of his good intentions toward you?”

“Do you imagine yourself praying that prayer with your teeth clenched and your pulse rate rising or out of the ease of love--- because you love God and he loves you?”

“How might God be put on display in your life through the very circumstances that you are asking him to eliminate?”

Teaching Notes

I said at the outset of our considerations that **Ephesians is an artist’s rendering of life**: a vision which Paul has to describe for us because we’ve never really experienced anything like it before.

In his description, Paul incorporates phrases like, *“before he made the world, he loved us”*, he is *“working out everything according to his plan”*, *“this is what he wanted to do, this is what gave him great pleasure.”*

Living into this epic Story necessitates prayer.

“Finally...” (6:10) Not that there’s nothing more to be said, but that he’s offered us enough to equip us for **blessing** [the good that God has declared; the divine reason]. It’s time to go and live into this vision for your life. Live in love. Live up to and into your calling (4:1).

Along the way, it demands meaningful communication with our Creator-God; some means of processing all that we find beautiful and challenging and disturbing. We will need guidance; we will need comfort; there will be things you need to ask for (to say thanks for). **You will need to pray.**

“True prayer is a struggle with God, in which one triumphs through the victory of God”. Soren Kierkegaard

I have struggled with prayer. It's not surprising, I guess, as I have struggled with every dimension of faith. Faith is a “full-frontal-attack” on my self-directed propensities. Faith's appeal is always outward toward God.

In prayer as a “practice”: I “drift”. I begin fully engaged in the present need and crisis and then, in unexpected and unannounced ways, I am envisioning myself hitting the winning shot in the NCAA tourney. I'm also hesitant to be one who breaks the “prayer circle”. I think that's (7) years of ‘bad luck’. If I am using the “A.C.T.S.” formula, do I have to start over if I forget or skip a step? Mostly, I realize my tendency to use prayer to eliminate my need for prayer (Motionless Exercise).

Admittedly, I am often “*guardedly optimistic*” when it comes to the quantifiable nature of prayer. I am perplexed why it seems to “work”, sometimes, and mostly for other people--- some having claimed to have it figured out (like it was a linear algebra problem). I have tried to follow the “instructions”, but perhaps I missed the small print disclaimer, “*Results are not typical*”.

[John the Baptizer's friends pray and he gets beheaded: Matthew 14. Peter's friends pray and the angels escort him out of prison: Acts 12].

Interestingly, what the Bible offers us most often is not some systematic instruction on prayer, but simply people praying... in all types of circumstances with all types of emotions.

Prayer is the rhythm of life.

Prayer is mostly a **reflex** reaction. It's a “*Wow!*”, to a beautiful work of art or a view of Mt. Rainier on a pristine, Seattle day. It's a “*Help me, God!*”, to a disturbing diagnosis. It's an, “*Oh, God*”, to violence and racism and seemingly senseless shootings. Sometimes we make those appeals or declarations to an anonymous higher power or influence or “vibration”. Sometimes, we address them personally: “*in Jesus name*”.

C.S. Lewis... “*I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time- waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God- it changes me.*”

“*Are any of you suffering hardships? Are any of you happy? Are any of you sick? Have any of you committed sins?*” (**happy, sad, sick and sinful**... that pretty much covers it, right?) [James 5].

The word **prayer** comes from the Latin root where we get our English word "**precarious**": *"Depending on the will of another; dependent upon uncertain premises; dependent upon unknown circumstances; characterized by a lack of security that threatens"*.

So, prayer is for people who desire to live life from another perspective; who accept the limitations of their understanding and their feelings of uncertainty; and who feel threatened by the possibility of being left to themselves- without God... without help!

Prayer seems both ultimate and immediate.

Our prayers must always begin with our present context, but they must eventually broaden out to a restorative purpose in order to not lose hope.

We often pray as if life were a "*short story*", with a simple plot which is easily resolved in a relatively short timeframe. In reality, life is an unfolding drama: it takes time to develop the characters (our character).

In our development, our faith must allow for "concurrency". We must be able to say, on the one hand, that God has created the world to function in such a way that he can be moved by our prayers; that prayers are "*effective*" (James 5).

But, in another equally authentic way, we can be confident that God isn't obligated by our prayers-- as we pray them. He is sovereign and is committed to his good purposes for his creation even when we seem to make decisions and ask for things which would sabotage his desires.

It seems that God often gives us what we would have prayed for in the first place, had we known what he knows.

It means that we are learning not to utilize prayer as a means of getting what we want, but actually having our desires transformed so that our voices are harmonious. We are asking for the same things!

As you are developing, I would like to offer **five centering prayers** you can always pray with confidence:

1. "*Father, I know that you hear me.*"

John 11:39-42 *"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, **I thank you that you have heard me.** I knew that you always hear me,..."*

If prayer is a response to what we know of God, it necessitates an accurate knowledge of God (thanks, Capt. Obvious!) Jesus dispels any notion of a disinterested and distant God and confirms that he is aware; that we matter.

2. *“Father, I know that you love me.”*

John 17:24 *Father, I want those you gave me to be with me, right where I am, so they can see my glory, the splendor you gave me, **having loved me long before there ever was a world.***

Jesus interacted with Father out of a robust sense of identity which was settled in being the beloved (Matthew 3:17) independent of any need to secure his attention or win his affection.

3. *“Father, I know that I can trust you.”*

John 17:9-10 *I pray for them. I'm not praying for the God-rejecting world but for those you gave me, for they are yours by right. **Everything that is mine is yours, and yours mine,** and my life is on display in them.*

4. *“Father, glorify your name.”*

John 12:27-28 *For my soul is deeply troubled. Should I pray, Father, save me from this hour? But this is the very reason I came! Father, **bring glory to your name.***

Glorifying prayers are “**weightier**” prayers because they involve **more than** just landing the promotion or getting some relief.

5. *“Father, not my will, but your will be done.”*

Matthew 26:39 *My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet, **I want your will to be done, not mine.***

The prayers that seem most significant- the ones that are most passionate and most sincere- are the ones that ‘don’t work’.

“How many of you have prayed what you considered to be sincere prayers which seemed to remain unanswered? How many of you would say that it precipitated something of a “spiritual crisis” for you? How many of you would say that it resulted in spiritual growth which likely would not have resulted from what you considered a more favorable response from God?”

There are ways in which only unanswered prayer and disappointment can heal you--- can grow you. It often alters our prayers (we adjust them to better align with what we believe is God’s heart). It often alters our perspective on God.

I feel like I need the process of prayer even more than I need the results of prayer.

I need to hear myself declaring his goodness, even when life seems to suggest otherwise. I need to rehearse that God is 'more than', so that my life won't be reduced to my own narrow interpretation.

Perhaps there aren't really unanswered prayers, simply answers we don't want, answers we didn't expect or answers for which we would never ask.

Surprisingly, I still pray. Unanswered prayer has not deterred me from praying. I simply pray out of a deeper conviction that *"God is good and his faithful love endures forever"* (Psalm 100).

There are many things in my life that I am no closer to intellectually resolving than I was years ago, so I am learning to hold a little more resolutely to my God and a little more loosely to my expectations. I am learning to pray with boldness and adaptability. I am learning to pray with urgency and patience.

I have determined to not rely so much on my intellect/rationale, but on my heart (*"... lean not on your own understanding..."* Proverbs 3:5-6)