



Facing the Reasonable Questions of a Skeptical Culture

PRAYER: WHY WE STRUGGLE

Does prayer work? Is anyone out there listening? Do these words change anything? These are questions asked by skeptics and Christians alike. Because after praying with complete sincerity, they still watch their worst nightmare happen. Someone loses their battle with cancer, a child continues down a dangerous path, a marriage comes to an end. These disappointments can lead any reasonable person to question the legitimacy of prayer.

Prayer is regularly used against Christians to try to disprove the existence of God. Skeptics ask us to perform a similar test to what we see in the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 20-40), though the roles are reversed. They point to a particular request and test to see if God will answer our prayer. Pray that God will heal everyone with cancer in the world, pray that God will stop all the violence, pray that you win the lottery this weekend, etc. Prayer is turned into the proving ground for God and/or our spiritual proficiency. God is on the hook for granting anything asked of Him. He's essentially turned into a magic genie: Rub the prayer lamp three times and, if you're a good Christian, your wish will be answered. At times we're led to believe that the validity of our relationship with God is based upon the results of our prayer life.

While skeptics use prayer to prove that God doesn't exist, it's also a source of struggle and fear for Christians. Take a moment and answer the following questions.

- What is your prayer life like?
- When is the last time you prayed?
- How often are you praying?
- How long are you praying?
- Are you praying with your family?

Now, what emotions are you feeling? If you are like me, your lack of consistency leads you to feel guilty. Guilt was that constant shadow that trailed my prayer life. Guilt is what motivated me to try harder. Prayer felt like an endless cycle: guilt, try harder, guilt, try harder. And when I still saw no answers to my prayer requests, the guilt piled up even more. We assume no answer means we don't have enough faith and need to try harder. Living in a constant state of guilt is like constantly feeling like you are on the verge of drowning. You only have enough energy to keep your head above water, but never enough to enjoy a relaxing swim. Can you even remember the last time you enjoyed praying?

The most unfortunate reality surrounding prayer is that many don't even bother to pray anymore. The ideal of a "good prayer life" is so confusing that we don't even know where to begin to make improvements. Prayer has been pushed to the margins of our Christian life and we just accept that's where it's going to stay.

Allow me to spend the remainder of this lesson encouraging the Christian with the beauty and simplicity of prayer. I want to see the guilt removed and the excitement returned around the idea that, as a child of God, we get to commune with him.

Enjoying prayer is not about systems, persistence, positions, or disciplines. To enjoy prayer you need to exchange your current reality for another. We don't earn the right to spend time with our Father; it has been granted to us. We don't maintain the right to be with Him; He guaranteed our access through Christ. We approach prayer from the status of what has been done for us instead of what we must do. Are you scared of what He might think if you say what you are really feeling? Well, He already knows. You see, unlike your earthly father, you can't hide what's really going on. Therefore, you might as well lean over onto His armchair and rest in His presence. Confess your lack of faith, sinful desires, and ability to fight sin. Seek the forgiveness He promises to give you. Ask Him to increase your faith, boldness, and love for others.

Stop bargaining with God. Ask Him without placing some requirement for yourself. Don't promise to try harder. Don't promise you will do better next time. You're a beggar who the Father adopted and now calls "My child." He promised to provide everything you need to accomplish the mission He gave you to love Him and love others. He calls us to simply depend on Him. He has given you everything you need to play your part in His mission to find His lost sheep—simply ask for it. He wants to hear about everything. Praises. Worship. Pain. Joy. Defeat. Victory. Everything. Because He loves you.

That is the picture of love. We can see Jesus demonstrating this kind of approach to the Father. In the garden, Jesus cried out in pain to His Father because it was almost too much for Him to bear. He cried. He wept. He shared His pain. If we depend on our Father to save us from His wrath and bring us home, we can trust His words when He says He will listen and answer our requests according to His will. We are saved according to His will, we seek answers according to His will, and our experience on this earth will be ten times more enjoyable with the Father in prayer than without.

My prayer for you today is that through all of your doubt,

fatigue, pain, and struggle, you would lift your eyes to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. God's love for you is not dependent upon your performance. God set His love on you while you were a sinner. God accepts you now as His child because of what His Son, Jesus Christ, did on your behalf. You are righteous, according to the ledger books! You didn't earn it. You can't maintain it. You can't lose it. You simply enjoy the benefits of being declared righteous.

You have every right at any moment to run to our Father and speak your mind. Moments of pure joy expressing His greatness. Tear-filled cries complaining of sin's demands on your broken body. Requests for help. Every word that falls from your lips, the Father holds as precious in His hand—because you are precious in His sight.

The joy of the Lord is your strength today! Rest your heart in the promise that He is pleased with you, that He loves you, and that He will protect you. When we rest, obedience becomes our joy and not our dread. We see glorifying our Father to be a worthy effort, not means of earning favor. Rest, weary saint. Rest and look to Christ today. You may not feel it, you will never fully understand it, but you belong to God. You are His child, and He loves you. What a gift prayer is to the weary pilgrim!

**Much of this lesson was adapted with permission from Jon Moffitt's chapter titled Why the Struggle? in A Pilgrim's Guide to Rest.*

Discussion Questions

Can you see an evolution in your prayer life? How has your prayer life changed as you have matured in age and in your Christian faith?

What is the mark of a "good prayer life?" Is it consistency, length, intensity, something else? Should we judge our prayer life? Can we judge the prayer life of others? Is there a right or wrong way to pray?

What is the purpose of prayer? In your own words, why do you pray?

How can you better pray for each other in your group?