

Unit 1 Introduction

When You Pray

Jesus took it for granted that His followers would pray. He said, “When you pray . . .” (Matthew 6:7); not if you pray, but when you pray. He then gave the disciples, and us, a model of how we should pray. We call it the Lord’s Prayer. There are at least 649 other prayers found in the Bible. It is obvious that God places a priority on prayer.

Annie Lamott wrote a book on prayer in which she suggested that there are really only three essential prayers: “Help, Thanks, and Wow.” That is, in our prayers we express our need, gratitude, and awe/wonder. Something powerful can and does happen through prayer. C.S. Lewis said, “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.”

Why Pray?

To pray is to experience the wonder and majesty of the God who, as we have heard it said, “moved into the neighborhood” on that first Christmas morning. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory” (John 1:14, NASB). God became one of us! Jesus lived, died, rose again, and ascended to the right hand of the Father where He is now interceding for humankind (see Romans 8:34). In Hebrews we are told Christ has become our High Priest; the One who mediates grace and truth to us: “He lives forever to intercede with God” (Hebrews 7:25). Jesus, our High Priest—the One who now intercedes for us before the Father—came to earth and lived among us. Because of that, He “understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most” (Hebrews 4:14-16, NLT). In this passage from Hebrews we are invited to pray. As The Message translation puts it, “Now that we know what we have—Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God,” we are invited to “walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.” We pray because we have been invited to pray!

My life was re-arranged in a revival service in 2017. I was converted at the age of 8, called to preach as a child, sanctified at the age of 16, ordained in 1972, served as a pastor for 38 years, and served the general church for 12 years. However, in December of 2017, after all those years of service and all those special moments, God awakened within me a new thirst for Him; a longing to know Him more intimately and to serve Him more effectively. He gave me one of the prayers of the apostle Paul which has become foundational in

my life: “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:9-11). My life was re-arranged by this prayer that was prayed over 2000 years ago! Prayers of petition change lives! The prayer of Paul reached across the centuries and God used his prayer to re-energize my life for yet another season of service! We pray because prayer makes a difference!

I share that story to make you aware of the fact that there is no expiration date on prayers. They do not expire. There are no “best when used by” warnings on prayers. Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for a child. They didn’t just breathe one prayer and call it good. They kept praying, even into their old age. Then one day, while Zechariah was in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared and told him “Your prayer has been heard” (Luke 1:13), his wife would have a son who would prepare the way for the Savior. We pray prayers for ourselves, others, and the world. God hears each prayer, each time we pray. God puts no time limits on our prayers and these prayers have influence long after we have prayed them. We pray because our prayers do not expire, they live on!

When You Pray

Prayer is a conversation with God. We go to the Father in the name of Jesus empowered by the Holy Spirit. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit are participating in our prayers. We pray in Jesus’ name because Jesus said, “If you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you” (John 16:23, NASB). To invoke the name of Jesus is to surrender our desires and longings to His will and His purposes. Jesus taught us that it is okay for us to go to the Father with our own desires. Once again, Jesus is our example: “If you are willing take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine” (Luke 22:42, NLT).

When we pray, we often ask for His kingdom to come and His will to be done here, now! However, in prayer we must center ourselves in God. We bring our lives, our loved ones, our dreams, our hopes, our fears, our longings, our joys, our sorrows, and place them in His hands. Yet, too often we ask God to come into a circumstance or situation and fix it and change it within our timetable! In reality, we need to bring in prayer the challenges of our lives and place them in Him and seek His will, rather than some quick fix. We learn to define our lives in and through Him, rather than asking Him to

necessarily re-arrange our circumstances. God understands and He feels what we feel; therefore, for our benefit, God will answer our prayers in His way in His time. When we pray, we rest in the safety of His kingdom and His will!

Prayer as Praise

God is my first thought of the day, my first conversation of the day, and my first read of the day. I begin every morning with this prayer: "Good morning, Father. Thank you for good rest. Thank you for family. Thank you for good health. Thank you for this day." Another way to say it is that I begin every day with praise. Even before I arise, I want to awaken my mind and heart to praise. At least one day a week I read/quote Psalm 23 back to God in praise for His ". . . goodness and lovingkindness . . ." that will follow me all the days of my life! In green pastures, beside still waters, in the dark valley of shadows and dread, I am learning to give thanks for His providence and mercy.

In prayer I praise God for who He is: "Hallowed [holy] is your name (Matthew 6:9, NASB)." The word hallowed, or holy, means that God is "exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness" (Merriam Webster). I often turn to Scripture when my own words seem to fall short in praise. A good example is Revelation 4:8 (NASB): "HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME." Another is Isaiah 6:3 (NASB): "Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." The Psalms are rich in language that will lift our minds and hearts to give praise to our God. (In fact, the Psalms end with a crescendo of praise as the last 5 psalms begin and end with the word "praise.") In prayer, we lay a foundation of praise that sustains us in life's ups and downs.

Prayer as Petition

We most often think of prayer as a petition to God for His intervention in some circumstance or relationship. The early church practiced prayer in this way. The book of Acts contains some incredible times of prayer as God's people gathered to seek His will and purpose in a crisis or time of decision. They prayed for wisdom. They prayed for courage. They prayed for deliverance. They prayed for their enemies. They prayed for one another. They prayed! Buildings were shaken! Prison doors were opened! The dead were raised! People were healed!

James 5:16 reminds us that "the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." When the early church met to find a person to replace Judas, they met for prayer (Acts 1:21-25). As they waited for the promise of the Holy Spirit they gathered to pray. Again and again, we find the early church gathering for corporate, united prayer. Prayer changes things. Prayer changes people. Prayer changes the person praying and the person for whom that person is praying.

Prayer as Practice

Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and your will find; knock and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7, NLT). To put it as succinctly as I can, "Pray!" Learn to pray. Read and study the great prayers of the Bible. Learn and use the language of prayer. Keep a record of answers to prayer. Mark your Bible and your calendar to celebrate answers to prayer.

Luke 5:16 tells us that "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." May that be true of us, as well!

J. K. WARRICK is a minister and general superintendent emeritus in the Church of the Nazarene.