

Motivating Reasons to Pray

by Dan Hayes

I know prayer is important. All the godly people I've ever met testify to the crucial nature of prayer in their lives. So I understand I should pray, but . . .

Well, let me be honest. It can seem that our motivation for prayer is results-oriented, simply to get answers. Prayer can feel like a grocery list: "Our Father, who art in heaven . . . Gimme, gimme, gimme!" This is sort of a "shop 'til you drop" way of praying. But somehow I cannot see that as the prime (and certainly not the most satisfying) reason to pray.

So I began to study how and why Jesus prayed, and discovered five very motivating reasons to pray.

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Prayer Builds My Relationship with Jesus

I am first called to prayer because it is a key vehicle to building my love relationship with Jesus Christ. Hear me now -this is important. Christianity is not primarily rules. It is relationship.

Certainly Christ has standards, but we don't become Christians because we receive standards. We become Christians because we receive Christ, who loves us, died for us, lives in us daily.

What I need, then, is to build my love relationship with Him. I have to learn to allow Him to embrace me, to care for me, to point out my needs to me (and how He fills them). I need to listen to Him, and I desperately need to talk to Him.

In Ephesians 3:14-19, Paul prays, "that you may be able to comprehend . . . what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge . . ." "Know" in this passage is the same word used for the intimate closeness of a husband and wife in sexual embrace. Paul is praying that you and I will experience that kind of love with Christ - not sexual, but intimate, deep, close, unfettered. It is so deep that Paul later says it "surpasses knowledge."

One place we can experience this is in prayer. When we "get down and get honest" before God, we are on His turf in a unique way. Seldom do we get closer to Him than

in prayer. When we pray, we can pray to experience this love, to be bathed in it, to learn how to give it back, to learn how to let it seep into the dry cracks and crevices of our lives.

I think that the chief reason for the gift of prayer is that we learn to receive, experience, and return His love in genuine relationship. Prayer is one place when God can get at us (and we think prayer is for getting at Him!) and speak to and minister to us. That is why David prays in Psalms 18:1, "I love you, O Lord, my strength."

Prayer Helps Us Overcome Temptation

Prayer is an important instrument in our overcoming sin and temptation. Perhaps no experience in the earthly life of Christ is more instructive on prayer than in Luke 22:39-41. Luke sets the scene. It is the night before Jesus' death. Jesus and His apostles have left the upper room and have navigated the winding path they knew well, up the Mount of Olives to Gethsemane. Jesus knows that great temptations are soon before them - His capture, His trials, His scourging, His mockery, the lure of their denial, His Crucifixion.



Mindful of their need for fortitude, He addresses them: "He says, "pray [in order] that you may not enter into temptation." What did He mean? Simply that their antidote to yielding to the temptations that fear, discouragement, and horror would soon present, was prayer. Prayer would fortify their trembling faith and courage. How could He know this? Because He, too, faced His own darkness. Looming in the next few hours were insults, torturous beatings, being nailed to a cross. Beyond that, He would bear all the sins of humanity, including the sins of all the child molesters and mass murderers and the Adolph Hitlers of all the ages. Can you imagine the terror that must have clutched at His throat? We are naive if we think it did not occur to the humanness of Jesus, to abort His mission, to look for another way.

So what did He do? He modeled exactly what He had told His disciples: He prayed so that He could defeat temptation. We are told by Luke that His prayers were so heartfelt, His struggles so intense, that His sweat was bloody, pre-figuring the flow that would come tomorrow. He began His prayers with, "Father if there is any way that this cup can pass from Me..." At the end of that hour, He rose from prayer, having settled with His Father, "not My will but Thine be done." Prayer had been the means of His victory. He returned to His men to find them . . . asleep! He had told them to pray. Instead, they followed the college students' motto: "When in doubt; sack out!" He confronts their tiredness, their crankiness at being awakened, and says again (verse 46), "pray that you may not enter into temptation."

Notice that He commanded this in the beginning of this passage, then He demonstrated it in the body of this passage, and He reiterated it at the end of this passage. When you face temptation, PRAY! That is what will see you through. But instead, usually we pray only after we have yielded. What about seeing prayer as our first option so that God can give us courage and strength prior to our temptations? If we would pray more, we would yield less!

Prayer Is Crucial in Determining God's Will

We pray because prayer is crucial in determining God's will. "Now you're talking," you say. Here's something you might hear from Christians: "I pray about my choices, and when I have 'peace' about one of the options, then I go with it." Yet, how askew is that from God's Word. Prayer certainly is vital in determining His will, but not because it gives us peace. Let me show you how faulty such thinking is.



I asked a group of Christians once, "How many of you have ever shared your faith, witnessed to another person about Jesus? Well, right before you shared your faith, which was almost certainly God's will, how many of you felt this warm, calm sense of 'peace?' Hold up your hands. Hmmm. No hands! Weren't you rather scared, nervous? Perhaps your palms sweated. Shoot, your hair sweated. No great feeling of peace there, but you did it anyway because it was God's will, right?" God's real will often produced scary feelings, not warm fuzzy ones. So wait. How does prayer help determine His will then? Jesus again gives us a demonstration in Luke's gospel. Read Luke 6:12-16. Here, He prays all night about choosing from the hundreds who followed Him, a special group of disciples whom we now know as the Apostles.

How did prayer help? It helped in the way John Wesley described. "I find," he said, "that the chief purpose of prayer in seeking God's will is that prayer gets my will into an unbiased state. Once my will is unprejudiced about the matter, I find God suggests reasons to my mind why I should or should not pursue a course."

The chief purpose of prayer, then, is to get our wills unbiased! The purpose is not to give us an ethereal sense of comfort. Thus, we pray to God about His will in some area, knowing that we probably are already leaning in a certain direction. We implore Him first to help our wills to move back to the center -that is, willing to do whatever is His will. Once we arrive there (and it may take some time), He shows us through our minds why one alternative is better than another and therefore is His will for us.

This is conjecture, but Jesus must have had a long talk with the Father regarding individuals and who to select for His closest followers. Jesus talked to the Father all night about this. Maybe Jesus had preferences for His followers. He probably had a list - at least a mental one. Perhaps Peter was already on it, but perhaps Andrew was not. Thomas certainly wouldn't have been on mine, and neither would Simon the Zealot. Maybe they weren't at the top of Jesus', either. Yet, through the work of His Father and His own yielded nature in intercession, the reasons came clear to Him why all three of these men plus nine others should be tapped.

Our searching out of God's will can be the same. We pray so that our wills (not our emotions) can be yielded to the Divine "whatever." Then II Timothy 1:7 becomes alive: "For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and sound judgment." As we spend time with God in prayer, He will guide us to ideas, thoughts, reasons, Scripture, which will reveal His will to us. It might be over days, weeks or sometimes months...but to know God's will requires talking to Him about it.

Prayer Accomplishes God's Work

Here is a major accelerator to my motivation to pray, and it stems from one of the most amazing statements Jesus ever made. It is found in John 14:12-14. It would be good to open your Bible there because you've got to see it to believe it.

It is the night of the Last Supper, and Judas has left to betray Jesus. His leaving allows Christ to pass on some of the most sublime of His earthly teachings to the remaining faithful. In the context, He is discussing His deity, His union with the Father, and the works of God in the world. Suddenly, He makes this statement: "Truly, truly . . . he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he shall do; because I go to the Father."



Look at that statement. Savor it. Regard it. Study it. "He shall do." Jesus did not say, "they shall do." He did not say, "the corporate body all combined together will do." He used a singular pronoun meaning one person. "The very works that I do and greater than these" is His statement.

What works did our Lord do on earth? Oh, just a few: cleansed the lepers, healed the sick, proclaimed release to the captives, taught tens of thousands, led thousands to salvation, raised the dead, healed those born blind. Piece of cake! Yet the plain fact of Jesus' statement is that the only qualifier to doing such works is "[the one] who believes in ME." How?

Verses 13 and 14 relate directly to verse 12. "And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." And, since He knew they wouldn't get it the first time (and neither would we), He repeats it: "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it."

Prayer is the way His greater works get done! Most of us will not be worldwide evangelists, though a few will be. Most of us will not be gifted in healing, though some will be. Most of us will not be great preachers and teachers, though some will be. But every one of us can kneel down and pray. We can pray, asking Jesus to touch the lost masses of earth and help snatch them from eternal darkness to eternal life. Through prayer, we can participate in Christ's healing power spreading both medically and miraculously across the earth. Every one of us can pray, asking Jesus to stop the forces of moral degeneracy that threatens to engulf the depth of the human spirit. Every one of us can do these things through our prayers!

Today, if I will, I can spend 15 minutes on peoples' behalf, influencing them for God and for good. Today, I can spend 20 minutes touching the entrenched Muslim minds of the Mullah's of Saudi Arabia or the ascetic Buddhist Monks of Nepal. Today, I can stand against pornography and rape and incest and child abuse in the far-flung towns of this country. Because, when I talk to God in my living room, or office, or church, He is the same God who reaches into families, into Nepal, into Arabia, into the Kremlin, into homes. I participate with Him, not only through my efforts and works in my geographic location, but also throughout the world in accomplishing His works through my prayers. It matters not what type of gifts, talent, or personality I

have; it matters only that I take this time to cooperate with Him in my prayers. And that is all that matters for you, too. May we "get it" before much more time passes. Jesus said, "...greater works than these he shall do; because I go to the Father." Anything that brings the Father glory, Jesus said, "ask Me...I will do it."

Prayer is a Weapon of Spiritual Warfare

Prayer is a major weapon in fighting the spiritual battle. Ephesians 6:10-20 reminds us that ultimately our struggles are not against humans, but against powerful spiritual beings and forces. The picture here is that of a war. Life as a Christian is not a playground; it's a battlefield.

We are instructed by Paul, an experienced soldier in this combat, to be appropriately prepared for our struggle. Modeling a Roman warrior, we put on the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, loins girded with truth, feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel, shield of faith, sword of the Spirit (the Word of God).

Now, it seems we have a complete set of armor and weaponry. And if I were writing this passage, I would say, "Now get out there and fight the battle!" But interestingly, Paul does not say that. In fact, he waits until verse eighteen to get to the heavy artillery of this arsenal of God... persistent prayer. Notice what he says: "With all prayer and petition pray . . . with all perseverance and pray . . . and pray"



In two verses, we are commanded to pray five different times. Do you think he (and God) are trying to make a point? He is attempting to seize our attention concerning prayer's power in the defeat of Satan and his tactics. Parallel to this text is 2 Corinthians 10:3,4: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses."

The weapon of prayer softens up Satan's fortress. It is the cannon, reducing the wall to rubble so that the troops can go through. Too often, the gospel moves slowly because the softening-up process of prayer has been neglected. When practiced, however, prayer "puts the wind at the back" of Christ's soldiers.

For example, a few years ago, at a prestigious American university, one powerful administrator was blocking the placement of additional full-time Christian workers on campus because of his own disbelief in the gospel. The Christian students on campus resorted first to prayer. Feeling that no one had the right to keep students from hearing about Christ, they prayed that God would either change this man's heart or remove him from his position. For six months they prayed faithfully.

Suddenly, for no "apparent" reason, he was transferred to a different position and a replacement named. Among the first questions the replacement asked was this: "Why aren't there more Christian workers on campus?" The workers came, and the gospel flourished. Prayer is key to fighting this spiritual battle.